

Lao Trip Report December 2007



This is a report of the trip that Howie and Bob took to Laos in Dec 2007, after having left there 30-some years before. We decided it was time to go back, see the old places we had been to, and explore some other areas we were unable to visit before. The map above shows the roads and locations we visited.

(Note: Howie's commentary is in normal font, *[Bob's is in italic]*.)

For a slideshow of these and other pictures from this trip, CTRL click this link and then hit the "slideshow" button:

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

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

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

Sunday night 10:00 pm 12/02/07 Leave LA

It was a Long flight which was made even longer by a late take off. I think I managed to sleep some, but it was fitful at best. Plane was pretty full. Passenger next to me was a tech engineer going to visit former colleague in Bangkok. There was a large group of optometrists and ophthalmologists going to Thakek and Savannakhet on a

mission to give eye exams and free glasses to rural Lao people. The trip is sponsored by their company. It is a lively group of 38. Asked me a lot of questions about Laos. Answered as best I could, prefacing my advice with a caution saying that I had not been back there for 30 plus years.

[Bob: It struck me, going through security in Tokyo, that in Asia you only have to take your shoes off in temples and homes – not in airports, while in the US you only have to take them off in airports. Strange how culture shock sneaks up on you like that.]

Arrived at the new airport in Bangkok Suvarna Bhumi about 6:30 am on 12/4/07 cleared immigration, customs and caught a taxi into Bangkok. The airport was a complete surprise. It is a totally modern and fantastically designed structure that has replaced Don Muang, the old international airport which is now used for domestic flights. Taxi driver had to pay toll fees twice, well I had to pay them. Mac had informed me of this. It was like a freeway. The sights from this elevated freeway were awesome, tall buildings everywhere, elevated train above Sukhumvit. It is a mind blowing vision to say the least. I thought that the buildings were well designed and all seemed to be different.



Tallest building when I left was the Dusitani Hotel. Traffic much worse than ours in LA. Met with Thomas H. Ross about 10:30 am and discussed the Drill Press Clamp. He is going to start shopping it around, and report back to me on my return to Bangkok. Temperature is about 90 degrees.

As per recommendation of Mac I am staying at the Federal Hotel, near the Park Hotel which used to be a good one. Mac says it has seen better days. Federal is a nice hotel with a helpful staff. Just off Sukhumvit and near some good restaurants, and easy links by train to the rest of the city. Has WiFi so Internet connection possible. 100 Bhat per hour, other places free, but what the hey, that's only 3.00 bucks for the convenience of surfing in your own room.

Construction is underway everywhere. On Soi 11 where the Federal is located, there were 3 new high rise buildings under construction. Cranes are lifting concrete and materials up and down all day. It is pretty scary considering the narrow confines of the lift. While lifts are taking place street is blocked off and lanes closed which makes for interesting traffic confusion. Multiply this build out manifold times to get a sense of what is happening in Bangkok. Construction of a rail link to the New Airport is under way and it is expected to be completed in time for some big event, forgot which, in two years.

[Bob: It's one thing to hear about the economic growth in Asia, but you really get the full sense of it when you're over there. Bangkok is truly a modern, world-class city – lots of vitality and momentum.]

[Bob: Right on the street outside the construction site across from the Federal was this seamstress, ready to keep the workers' clothes in good repair.]



Wednesday 12/05/07

Bob and I went for Breakfast at a German Restaurant called Old German Beerhouse down the street from the Hotel. Charged the phone at a 7/11 by purchasing a sim card. Very busy place. Must look into 7/11 stock. Every store of theirs is busy. Met with Richard Nudera about 11:00 and talked about the Drill Press Clamp. He is interested and will present it to a shop he thinks will be interested. Both men think it has real possibilities. Met Frank Manley, Les Strouse, Mac Thompson and Bob Majoros for lunch. It was a great meeting. *[Bob: One of the reasons Mac was so glad to see us was that we had carried over in our luggage for him several beer making kits. I'm sure he's putting them to their intended use.]* Frank and I stayed until 5 talking about possibilities, handicrafts and roads and bridges and all kinds of stuff. Will be seeing him again in Vientiane. Clarified some of the events in Laos not much change. Les Talked about flying experiences and close calls. All of us remembered the events leading up to the T-28 destruction derby at the end of the runway at Wattay Airport in 1965.

Turns out that Mac and Sunee are heading for Long Tieng on Monday or Tuesday. It might be an opportunity for all of us to go together.

[Bob: I took off sightseeing. I had never actually seen the sights when I was here earlier, so I went wat-hopping.]



And took a klong (canal) taxi back, sagely avoiding the suffocating pollution on the clogged streets, only to confront even more “fragrant” pollution on the waterways. It was quite a ride. After all, they are taxi drivers.]



Thursday 12/06/07

Found an optometrist and ordered some sunglasses for delivery on Saturday about 3:30. I leave about 7:30. Flight was changed and I was not notified. Could have been a big waste of time getting to the airport early and then waiting until 7:30 instead of 2:30, same flight as Bob’s. Frank told me to check status, and I am glad that I did or I would have been standing around the airport for 4 or 5 hours. Bought a few trinkets. Walked along Sukhumvit, many stalls on the road selling everything imaginable. Traffic that makes LA look like an empty field. True gridlock.

Just made contact with Khun Apuntree, and have an appointment with her at Asia Books, Rama 9 Rd. Chamnan Phenjati Business Center 65/66, 65/70 7th floor Khet Huang, Kwang Huaykwang Bangkok 10320 when I return from Laos on the 26th at 3:00 pm. Not to far from the Federal in distance, but time not sure.

[Bob: More temples. The Grand Palace was more than just a bit over the top.]



Friday 12/07/07

Bob and I went sight seeing. Visited the place where they make the Monk's begging bowls the traditional way, from 8 pieces of metal for the Buddhist 8-fold path, and bought one. Aree Sayradthong the proprietress of the enterprise wanted us to try our hand at working on one. It takes a lot of pounding to shape them.





Cheap immigrant American labor – the key to low production costs



Oriental Hotel Went also to The Oriental Hotel and browsed the old buildings. Authors' Wing (original building

[Bob: I love the old colonial architecture in this part of the world. I especially wanted to see this hotel because I brought along on this trip to read British author Somerset Maugham's (of Razor's Edge fame) book "The Gentleman in the Parlour." It's his account of a trip he took "through Burmah, the Shan States, Siam, and Indo-China" in the 1930's and he stayed in this hotel. In fact, on the walls of the Reading Room are pictures of him and several other famous authors – just the pictures mind you, no name labels. You are, after all, expected to recognize them (sniff!). Reading his description of Bangkok from 80 years ago, it's apparent that the soul and essence of the city remains the same, however much some of the buildings may have changed.]

I went into Jim Thompson's store in the hotel and bought a Thai Silk pillow cover with an elephant embroidered on it. Gerry wanted a pillow cover. Jim Thompson was instrumental in developing the Thai Silk industry in Thailand. He disappeared under very mysterious circumstances. He took an evening walk on his estate and simply disappeared. He was never seen alive or otherwise again.

[Bob: Just to show the contrast with modern Bangkok, when you walk down the hall from the Authors' Wing and ascend a short flight of stairs, you enter this, the lobby of the new wing of the hotel:



Had lunch at the German Restaurant near the Federal Hotel. Johnny e mailed me saying that the Mali Nam Phu is fully booked so he put us up at the Paris Hotel around the corner. Hope it is ok. He probably forgot to do it when I notified him 3 weeks ago. Oh Well.

Saturday 12/8/07

Sleep did not come easy nor did it last long. I was up at 3:30 and could not get back to sleep. Too excited I guess. We left the Hotel about 4:30 pm expecting a jammed traffic ride to the airport but went through without a hitch. Plane was 30 minutes late taking off and it was full. Not an empty seat. We were jammed in, Bob's legs were right up against the seat in front of us. Arrived very late about 10:00 pm and waited in line for visas. Not too long about 45 minutes. Entry fee was \$30.00, and only one photograph was required. Johnny was there and after we changed some money, he whisked us to our hotel. *[Bob: When I changed some money at the airport I nearly became an instant millionaire. The Lao kip used to go for 500 to the dollar. Now it's 10,000 to 1.]* The Lao Paris Hotel is located at 100 Samsenthai, right across the street from the old Constellation, now called the Asia Pavillion. Rooms are air conditioned, clean and have wifi. Could not see much of the city because it was dark. But it is obvious that there has been a lot going on. I was pretty tired so I slept well.

Sunday 12/09/07

We had coffee and cinnamon rolls at the Scandinavian bakery at the Nam Phu. The fountain turned on just as we sat down to eat. It was the first time I have ever seen it turned on. In all the years I was in Laos I never once saw it turned on. It is quite a nice fountain surrounded by a courtyard paved with brick like tiles.



[Bob: One of the first things I noticed upon arrival were the flags. They have two now: a country flag which is actually the old Lao Issara flag, and the party flag which is the old Soviet hammer and sycle on a red background. (I have the old "elephant" flag on the wall in my office at home.)]

Had eggs and French bread at the hotel. Spent the rest of the day with Johnny. Climbed the Monument, went past the USAID compound, visited our old house in Dong Palane, went to a wood gallery that has some really great stuff, visited That Luang, bought some tee shirts. That Luang was a big surprise. The entire front courtyard is paved with brick tiles, the huge parking lot is paved in asphalt, and all well maintained.







Had dinner with Johnny, Bob and Mac. Vientiane has changed. Almost all streets are paved, and there is a vitality that I had never seen before. Many of the old landmarks are gone, so I have had a little difficulty in keeping my bearings. Lan Xang has sidewalks lined with shady trees and all of the buildings facing it have either been rebuilt or remodeled. Lots of traffic, mostly motorcycles, tons of them. Looks and sounds like a swarm of locusts heading down the road.



Looking at the Monument from the corner of Samsenthai and Lan Xang

Morning market is being rebuilt, kind of like a three story mall. Many stalls, selling goods from all over the world, like TV's, fridges, stereos, phones, electric fans, air-conditioners, hi-fi equipment, just everything. Visited the ethnic minorities market across the street from the morning market and bought some hand woven cloth from the northern hill people. *[Bob: I wound up buying a wall hanging for me and a scarf for my wife.]*

Everywhere we go, the people are friendly. and their sense of humor is just as I remember it. They love repartee and risqué euphemisms. Because Lao is a tonal language, there is great latitude and acceptance of the double entendre.

Monday 12/10/07

Met several OLH for lunch. Mac, Jim Chamberlain and Art Crisfield were also present. Jim bought my [book](#) and suggested that I check out Monument Books. (Art give me directions.) I did and Jerome Bertheau the manager bought the 3 copies I had left and is going to order about 50 more. He said that he has been looking for the book and how to purchase it. Wants me to do a lecture on the book at sometime in the future. Apparently there is a literary group that meets at the bookstore. Met Charles Alton, with whom I hope to be talking with again. We will not be going up to Long Tieng with Mac. Commandant up there is a bit worried about too many Americans. So Bob and I will be making our own plans tomorrow.

Tuesday 12/11/07

I delivered the present from Pranny to his sister Palamy. She and her husband invited Bob and I out to dinner when we return from Pakse. Walked to morning market and bought opium weights to complete scale set I bought in ChiangMai 40 years ago that was lost by Illa. Bought a stone carved box that is simply beautiful. Bought a couple of other doo dads as well. Made arrangements to hire a car for Thursday for our trip to Pakse. We will visit the gold mine on the way back from Pakse. Mac could not get permission from the commandant to let more Americans up there. Our trip will be at least 7 days. I want to see the Ord River Camp and operations on the Bolevan Plateau. Johnny says this could be a biggy. Also want to see many projects I worked on in the Pakse area. Things are getting very interesting. My Lao continues to surprise me. I just can't believe it is still there after all of these years. The words just seem to come out when I need them. Well most of the time. I asked my brother "the shrink" about this, and he replied that, "you were there for 12 years during which time your brain constructed synapses and connections. When you came home they went dormant. All they needed for revival was a password a stimulus. Hearing Lao spoken turned the whole thing on again."

Wednesday 12/12/07

Completed rental car arrangements. We leave for Pakse on Friday morning. Thursday night is a lecture on ancient Lao history/literature which we want to see at the Monument Book store. Went to Carol Cassidy's studio/workshop. She is the weaver of Lao silk. I purchased a Shawl for Gerry.



Carol Cassidy looms large in Lao fabrics

It can also be used as a runner. John, her husband bought a book from Monument, and is going to tease Penny Khounta about not reading it for fear it might influence her thinking and interfere with the writing of her own book. Met Sombath Somphone and his wife Shui Ming for lunch and visited his school/training facility.



[Bob: Very interesting approach they take. They emphasize sustainability and trying to imbed that concept in their students. I also thought it was interesting that they were working to integrate their religion into the educational process. They do this by having monks from various wats come and participate in the teaching. Mind and heart kind of thing. Prior to the French establishing a secular educational system designed primarily to provide local staff for their colonial administration, all the education in Laos was done in the wats, including a wide variety of practical skills like carpentry and agriculture. Looks like Sombath's picking up on a very old idea.]

Highly recommended by Prany. We are going to try and work out a program where I can come back and teach. Teach a course in wood technology. He says that he may be able to arrange a grant and some money. I will check out a wood shop set up in a Gov't school as a possible classroom location when I come back from Pakse. Went into a wood gallery on Samsenthai near That Dum and some of the stuff is dynamite, but very overpriced. I guess they are making a profit because the door is still open, but they would do much better with a different pricing schedule. Bob and I were the only ones in the store. Their pricing does not leave any room for wholesale or growth outside of Laos let alone, shipping costs.

Thursday 12/13/07

Went to a lecture on Lao Literature in the 15th and 16th centuries at the Monument Book store. Excellent presentation by the daughter of the man who found thought to be lost manuscripts in Pali/Sancrit but written in Lao text of ancient Lao stories. *[Bob: Including a pretty impressive Lao epic poem. I'll have to wait to read it though. My Pali's a little rusty and it hasn't been translated into English yet. She did mention that one way she is trying to get some of this classical literature in front of average Lao people is by performing reciting classical poetry to hip-hop/rap music!]* These manuscripts were taken by the Thai during the sack of Luang Prabang in the 15th century?? Jim Chamberlain translated a similar chronicle. Earlier that day, Bob and I had a long meeting with Frank Manley at his office.

Went to dinner at a Lao version of Mexican food with Mac, Sunee, Mike Carroll, a nurse, can't remember her name, and Frank Manley. Made reservations at the Mali Nam Phu Guest House for our return next Saturday from our trip to the south.



Interior courtyard of the Mali Nam Phu guest house.

Having trouble with the internet connection here at the Paris hotel, so went across the street to an internet place. Very slow but at least I was able to check on things. Population explosion here in Laos is a concern. When I left Laos in 1975 the population of Laos was just about 3 million. It is now 6.5 million. More than half of the population is under 30 years old, and most of them have hit the cities. Not sure how this is going to impact Lao Culture. There are an estimated one million inhabitants living on the Vientiane Plains. It seems that almost everyone has a motorcycle and a cell phone. Samlaws are gone, replaced by tuk tuks, a motorized version.



The Last Samlaw

One of the most disconcerting realities I have discovered is that there is no recognition of the USAID contribution to infrastructure by either the Lao Government or our own. Embassy types do not know what USAID did even though there are many reports available on the subject. All are on the internet and posted on the USAID web site. Comment oft quoted by a certain embassy type was that all USAID did was to drill wells for 10 years. Now either he is a poorly informed person or a dolt, or perhaps he is just repeating what the present regime has been telling the world. It would not be possible for them to recognize what we did because

for years they have been telling their people that all of USAID were spies or trying to steal Lao resources. I had one Lao tell me that all we wanted was their resources, hell we did not know they had any. We knew that there was tin, the French were mining that east of Thakek. We did not have a geologist in all of USAID, and if we had one, there was no way for any exploration to take place because of security. To admit that USAID accomplished much would be a serious loss of face. At Mike Carroll's suggestion Bob is writing a condensed version of the USAID/Laos Termination report which will define the most salient points of the USAID contribution to Lao infrastructure ie Public Health like Mahasot Hospital, Public Works like roads, over 3000 miles worth and bridges, hundreds of them, Agriculture like irrigation systems, for instance Nam Tan, crop improvement, introduction of IR-8, fertilizer usage, refugee relief, public safety, to name just a few things.

Friday 12/14/07

Left Vientiane about 10:00 am and headed up route 13 for Paksane. Our driver is named Boun Liang. Main road Route 13 is a paved great highway. Road to Muang Khao is not, but not nearly as bad as when I was there 44 years ago. Went up to Muang Khao and entered the fuh shop on the riverbank. It is in the same place as before. I asked if there were any older people from the village around. I took some pictures of the river and compared them to the ones I took forty plus years ago and they are exactly the same. Opened up my computer and started showing the photos of the village when I was there. An older woman started to pass by, saw the crowd, and entered the fuh shop and sat down. When I pulled up the photo showing the three girls carrying water, she shouted, "that's me." Her name is Nang Gong Cum and she knew all of the people in the rest of the photos. Visited the school teacher Chantadom's wife and asked about some of the projects we constructed. One of the wells caved in and was ultimately filled in. We had lunch at the fuh shop. I needed to use the facilities, and guess what, there was a hua suam, water seal privy, in there. It was of a more modern design, but nonetheless perhaps our program had started something.



Nang Gong Cum is the one on the left. She was 12 years old when this photo was taken.



Nang Gong Cum as she is today.

After lunch we said our goodbyes, and left heading for Thakek where we arrived just after sundown about 6 pm. We registered at a guesthouse just off of the Mekong River. All in all a great day. Had dinner at a local restaurant where a party was in full bloom, for guess who, the group I met in the plane going to Laos to give eye check ups. They gave eye exams to over 15,000 rural Lao people. Bob and I had breakfast the next morning at the Mekong hotel where they were staying. We met some of the participants. One was an ophthalmologist from San Diego.

[Bob: Thakek is the provincial capital for the area I worked in. I lived most of the time out in small villages, so when I “came to the big city” this was it. Fortunately (at least from my own selfish perspective - which would have every place I ever visited go into a full time-freeze as soon as I left so I could return years later and find it just as it was) Thakek has changed very little from when I was there. Except, the Chez Louis French restaurant is gone. Damn. I really liked that place. Had the waiter with the gold tooth and everything. Oh, well.]

There is still a road tax. Every so often the driver had to pay a 2000 kip fee, about .20 cents. Not sure if these were boundaries of states or municipalities. Forgot to ask. After our trip we reimbursed the rental company some 30,000 kip (about \$30.00) to the driver for these fees on the road.

Saturday 12/15/07

We left Thakek about 9:00 am

Arrived Pakse about 3:00 pm. Ride down was uneventful. Went through many villages where I built schools, and yes wells. Interesting to note all road signs are in Lao and English. Stopped for diesel about half-way and talked with the owner of a small farm tractor, a jak quai. These machines are so much more versatile than the water buffalo and so much more efficient that their future is assured and their importance to Lao agriculture will gradually replace that of the ancient tradition of the water buffalo. The city has changed, as have all of the other cities. New Bridge across the Se Done River and bridge location further south. The old bridge is still there, utilizing old Bailey bridge parts. We are staying at the Pakse Hotel. Nice, clean and reasonable and has wifi Internet. It is managed by a Frenchman who seems to be very sharp and nice. When he told me that he was French, he stated that, "I hope that you won't hold it against me." I replied that I wouldn't. Had a chance to walk around a bit at the confluence of the Se Done and Mekong rivers. Still pretty much the same. Saw the bridge across the Mekong into Champassak. Wow and double Wow. Tomorrow we will head south for Kong Island and the falls. Connecting to the Internet has been difficult for the past few days. Finally resolved the issue tonight, with the help of a Lao tech guy used by the hotel.



Bridge across the Mekong at Pakse.

Sunday 12/16//07

Left Pakse about 9:00 and arrived at the waterfalls Khon Phapheng at noon. Awesome power and very noisy but not very high. Took photos, had a drink and started back. The site is a very popular tourist attraction for Lao and tour groups from Cambodia and Thailand. It was this geographical impediment that made travel into Laos so difficult. River navigation to the north was blocked or at the least made difficult by its presence. Stopped along the way back to look closely at a wat on the top of a very steep hill. Bob made he climb up to the top, I was not up to it. Another stop was made to ask about all the stumps sitting on the side of the highway. There are thousands of them from Pakse to the Lao border with Cambodia. We found out that they are rose wood stumps and have all been purchased by Vietnamese Carvers. We saw a sample of what kind of sculptures they carve. Hard to describe, but an eagle and prey seemed to be the theme. Excellent road all the way, lots of cattle crossing, water buffaloes, goats, bicycles, motorcycles, farm tractors, and kids who just do their thing. So far we have traveled over 1050 kms.



View looking north from the Pakse Hotel Roof Restaurant. Mekong River is in the left top corner.



Looking east from the roof top of the Pakse Hotel. Mekong River is in the right hand corner.



The confluence of the Mekong and Sedone Rivers looking up stream



It was this geographical impediment that made travel into Laos so difficult, and was probably responsible for its near isolation.



Monday 12/17/07

Left Pakse about 9::00 AM and headed for Paksong about 40 kms. Arrived took a quick look around. We saw a new large open market, but the town looked pretty much as I remember it. Market was crowded.



Drying Coffee at Paksong



Left Paksong and drove east to Houi Kong. The road was in poor shape and need of repair. This is the road that I helped build in 1968. There were many “plantations” along the roadside, teak, pine, bananas, coffee and large expanses of grass. Large areas will not support anything but grass because of the shallow layer of a Bauxite

deposit underneath. I built a road right over the top this deposit and never had a clue that all of that wealth was just beneath my feet. Located my old house and the fishpond and dam. Pond is silted up and the dam is not used, but the concrete work is still intact. With just a little bit of effort, it could all be put back in working order.



Talked with the Ma Tao who rented her house to several AID and IVS guys. She asked about them. My house was on her property next to the stream. It was no longer there. It had been torn down shortly after I left. There are coffee plantations, groves of pine and teak trees all along the road. Following Johnnie's advise we took a back road to the Attapu Highway. What a view! The road winds it way down the escarpment through a canyon that is truly awesome. At the junction of the Attapu turn off we ran into Paul Simcock the general manager of VGS who has been drilling for the Ord River Resource people and Oxiana and Pan Australian Resources. He said that the Ord River deposit is perhaps one of the largest bauxite deposits in the world. He also said that Pan Australian Resources is finding more and more mineral resources in their lease area up north and will surpass Oxiana.

[Bob: In many parts of Laos there is still a lot of unexploded ordnance (UXO) (bombs) around and there is a considerable continuing effort on the part of several international organizations to deal with it. Simcock mentioned that, during their exploration for drilling test holes, they had come across a truly unique specimen of UXO: a large Russian missile. Still on its transporter, just sitting out there. My guess is an SA-2 or SA-3 air defense missile. Would love to get a picture of that sometime.]

We saw incredible views of forest and rivers on this road to the Attapu highway. Made decision to turn left away from Attapu because it was late afternoon when we got to the junction. Went the back way to Paksong, via Thateng. Thateng was a hard fought for outpost during the war on the north side of the Boleven Plateau. Arrived back in Pakse at about 5:00 pm just before sundown. This trip was over 300 kms.

Tuesday 12/18/07

Left Hotel about 9:00 and headed for Saravane. The km 21 road was originally built in 1967 by PWD. George Wagner was the supervisor and I was number 2. We crossed over two bridges I helped build, the Houie Champi and the Houie Pa Lai, and from the looks of them, they are the very ones my crews and I completed. We stopped and took a few pictures. A villager was coming up the bank with his fishing net. I asked how he had done and he replied not to well, only two fish. I kiddingly suggested that he fish in the Houie Pa Lai. He laughed, Houie Pa Lai means stream with lots of fish. The main road is paved and in great shape. Lots of banana plantations, coffee, teak trees, speeding along everything seems like a blur, suddenly Bob shouts, yute,

stop. Boun Liang and I are surprised and confused. Bob slides out of the car and starts looking at some lonesome Cactus, Prickly Pear, two small plants growing along the road. [Bob: whaddya 'spect? I live in

Phoenix now, partner. Did you expect me to just let it go by? Hah!] Cactus is not native to Laos, and Bob remembered a stand of it along route 13 near where he spent time in Thakek. That was 40 years ago. We asked the home owner in front of where this plant was growing where it came from, “no clue” she told us.



How could Howie and Boun Liang have missed this? Really!

This house had a rice mill in the back grinding away, an impossible investment 40 years ago because this one was electric. They pulled out some chairs and water bottles and invited us onto their veranda for a drink and a chat. Unfortunately we were kind of late so we thanked them for their invitation and headed back up the Paksong road to see the waterfall we passed yesterday. It is called Tat Phan, sheer drop of about 1000 feet and then another of about the same. There is a Small resort on the cliffs over looking the falls. There was a Thai tourist group there. We had a great conversation with the group leader, lots of humor, laughter and double entendre. Got back to the hotel about 3:00. Bob and I both are amazed at the vitality and variety of the farming and small business growth. It seems that everywhere we look there are small businesses along the roads. A more important sign of this growth is the numerous new cement and brick houses that are under construction. Added another 300 kms to the trip.

Wednesday 12/19/07

I went up the Paksong Road and located the refugee road at km. 12 that I started in 1972. Located the bridge in the photo I have of the road with the mountain in the background. They changed the alignment of the 1st 2 kms. of the road, moving it west of the original position, and it is now paved. But my bridge is still there and it is still working. A diversion dam has been built just down stream from the bridge.



Bridge on the Km 12 road about 2 kms north of the Paksong Road 1972



Bridge today. This part of the road is the original right of way. Paved road is about 1 km south of here, off of the Paksong Road.

I tried to find the USAID head office near the airport, where PWD had its offices, and I think I did, but did not find my old house near the airport. Never mind, it has been a great trip and experience. We leave tomorrow am for Thakek. The Pakse Hotel where we stayed is located off of route 13 in the north part of town. It is a great

place to stay. Breakfast is included and there is a restaurant on the roof, which gives you a great view of Pakse. Food is good too. About 18.00 a day or 180,000 kip and wifi is free. Credit cards are accepted.

Thursday 12/20/07

Left Pakse about 9:00 and arrived in Thakek about 1:00 registered at the Mekong Hotel on the Mekong River. Clean, breakfast is not included but they have a dining room that serves a fair breakfast. Then took a short trip due east on Highway 12. The karsts just appear to sprout out of the ground. The image of this is just incredible. It would be a great trip to continue to the Vietnamese border. We don't have time this trip nor the proper vehicle and equipment, so maybe next time. There is so much to see, that it is hard to prioritize. We have seen so much and yet it is generally what we know and have seen before. About 20 kms out of Thakek heading east on Highway 12 is one of the cement plants. The limestone karsts provide plenty of raw materials. I understand that there is another one in Vang Vieng. They were paving the road, and it is my understanding that it is scheduled for completion this year. I don't think they will make it this dry season. Once paved it will be a major road link to Vietnam.

Friday 12/21/07

We left Thakek at about 9:00 am and headed north. About 7 kms. North of Thakek we pulled over to look at a natural rock formation called Phonpheng. It seems to have baffled historians and archeologists alike. There are some who believe that this formation is part of an ancient city wall, or the remnants of some pre-historic fortifications. Well I am no expert, but I think I can safely say that it is just a natural rock formation Geologically explained. It appears to me that the softer surrounding rock has eroded away leaving a rock intrusion structure that looks like the walls of a fortified city. "The Wall" itself is about 50 ft. high and at least 8 ft. thick. Not sure of its length. No archeological digs have been made. Some religious sect has used this location for services.

When Bob was in country he had been living at a village named Thana on the banks of the Hin Boun River and could never go east more than a few kms because of security. We turned east on Highway 8 and within just a few kms found ourselves in the midst of the Limestone Forest. This is a series of uplifted and vertically tilted limestone ridges that extend in a northwest to southeast direction for about 100 kms. This area has become the third National Biodiversity Conservation Area (NBCA.) We continued east climbing up and down these ridges, on an excellent paved road. We pulled over at a lookout point. Before us was a view that boggled the mind. The ridges extended beyond and as far as the eye could see. It was magnificent.



View of the Limestone Forest

We continued east and turned into a graveled road that led us to the Nam Thuen hydroelectric project. The engineers had drilled a tunnel through the mountains that gives the power station approximately 1000 feet of head generating about 256 megawatts of power. This generating capacity is going to be increased in the future. Nam Theuan 2 is under construction and that will generate over a 1000 megawatts of electric power. It should be operational after this rainy season. These power generating facilities will create a steady and dependable income for Laos. Furthermore, the valleys they flood are not widely settled so population disruptions are minimal. We turned back and where the graveled road to the dam site made a junction with highway 8 Bob shouted yute once again. Along side of the road was another cactus growth. This time planted along an existing fence, that when fully grown will replace the wooden one it was in front of. No one knew where the cactus originally came from. We then headed west to route 13 and turned north to Paksane.

Arrived at Paksane about 3:00 pm and registered at the Paksane Hotel located on route 13 north of town. It is brand new and the rooms are comfortable and well appointed. Don't eat at the hotel restaurant. The waitress did not speak a word of Lao, she was a newly arrived Vietnamese. It was the worst meal we have had since our arrival. The old ferry location has been replaced by a new bridge. My memory really played games with me because I could have sworn that the old bridge and ferry location were near to the mouth of the Nam Sane River at it's junction with the Mekong River. I was only about 2 kms off. Bob and I walked along the Nam Sane to the junction of the Mekong, arriving just at sundown. Took a few photos and headed back along one of the back roads. We were being followed by an individual that made my hair stand on end. Bob felt the same way and we took on a defensive posture. A friend of this fellow finally saw that the targets, i.e. us, were wary, whereupon our suspect and the other guy sped away on a motorcycle. That was the only time I had the creepy crawly feeling during the whole trip. It brought back some memories of times past when that creepy crawly feeling was a constant.

Saturday 12/22/07

Left Paksane about 9:30 and arrived Vientiane about 1:00. Our total trip was 2568 kms. Frank Manley called us on Boun Liang's phone at about km 30 on the way in. It seems that he had been trying to call me and my phone kept saying busy. I keep forgetting to leave it on. We had dinner with Frank.

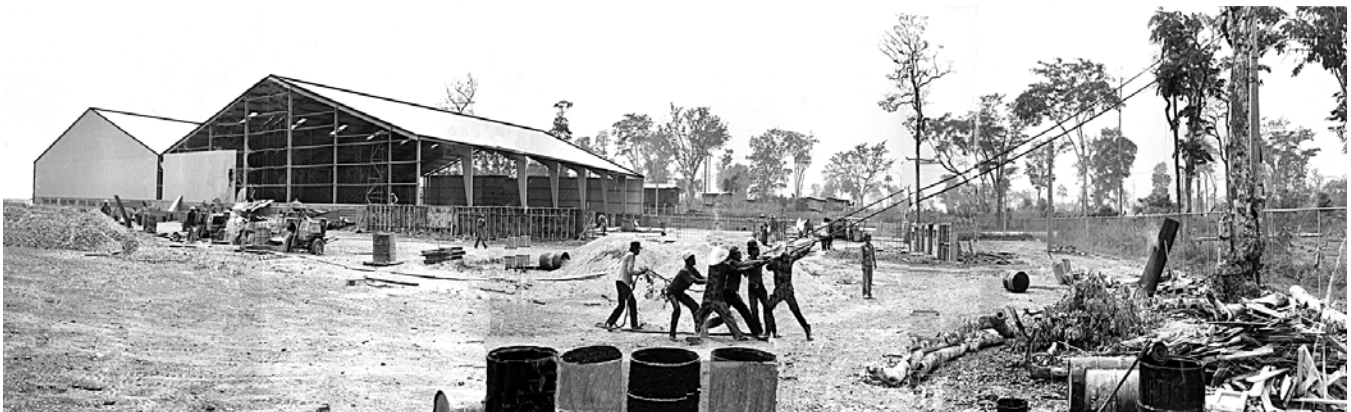
[Bob: at the restaurant we met Dan Davenport, an Aussie archeologist spending some time down south near Pakse at Wat Phou working on his PhD. Right then he was working at finding a way to stay longer in Laos. Laos seems to have a way of enticing people to stay longer than they had planned on. Dan has been doing some interesting work with regard to Wat Phou and its alignment with Angkor Wat. Wat Phou actually predates Angkor by a considerable amount and apparently there are hints of a very ancient road linking the two directly north-south, visible, I've heard, on Google maps. Wow!]

Bob has been working on a synopsis of USAID accomplishments for Mike Carroll. We suggested to Frank that he start a newsletter on what is happening in Laos from a businessman's point of view. He seemed interested in the concept.

[Bob: Our favorite lunch when we were in Vientiane was a fruit shake. The only problem was making up our minds which kinds of fruit we wanted in it.]



At km. 9, we turned in at what used to be Dong Dok, a college that was originally funded by USAID. It is now the Lao National College. PWD designed and constructed many of the buildings on the campus. In 1974 I built a large warehouse near there at Ban Pha Khao. Boun Liang knew where it was because he was on the survey crew that did the original layout and so we went. It was still there and in fact looked very good.



Warehouse Under Construction @1974. 1st unit is almost complete, 2nd is about half done and the concrete work for the 3rd is underway. The men are trying to pull down a tree, that I later sent to the saw mill and had its burl cut into about 20 table tops. I still have one hanging on my studio wall.



Ban Pha Khao Warehouse Today.

Sunday 12/23/07

Bob finished the synopsis for Mike Carroll. Mike informed us a couple of weeks ago that there are people in the US Embassy who have absolutely no clue as to what USAID did here 30 plus years ago. That is why Bob condensed a 375 page document, a document published by USAID and is readily available on the internet, entitled the “USAID Termination Report” into about 6 for dissemination to a select few embassy types. Frank has copies of the mission monthly and yearly reports going back to 1962 or so. They should be scanned and saved digitally. Mike is leaving for Cambodia tomorrow so we will not be able to talk with him about it. . *[Bob: Finished it, at least for up to 1972. The folks Mike showed it to were favorably impressed, including embassy people and some Lao who were also unaware of what had been accomplished. If you’d like a copy, let me know.]*

Went to dinner at the L’Opera Italian Restaurant, located at the Nam Phu. The best food since we arrived here, and the most expensive.

Monday 12/24/07

Bob and I went to a Kodak photo developing place to get some photos duped so we could send them to some Lao friends. One went to Nang Gong Cum whose photo I first took in 1964 when she was 12 years old. Then we went to the Post Office and mailed them. The postal clerks were friendly and helpful. Frank called and was very happy about Bob’s newsletter idea. He told some friends about his suggestion and has potential subscribers already. I bought Gerry another piece of Lao woven artistry. Having dinner with Pranny’s sister Palamy and her husband around 8:00 pm.

Have an appointment with Khamphoui Saythalat with the Participatory Development Training Center at 9:00 am. He is going to pick me up at the Hotel at 8:30 am on Tues morning. We are going to look at the equipment available for a training program. Should be interesting. Went to dinner with Palamy and her husband, it was the best Lao food I have ever had in Laos or anywhere for that matter, The dinner consisted of Mai Pai, Mai Vai, Ghai Pa, Ngua, a sausage kind of thing and Khao Nieo. Absolutely stuffed. Delicious. Palamy and her husband invited us to stay with them on our next trip to Laos. “Save hotel expenses,” she said.

Bob leaves tomorrow morning.

Tuesday 12/25/07

Bob got off on time this am. Khamphoui picked me up about 9:00 am and off we went to the Technical School. Lots of good equipment, most of it needs maintenance. Planer blades, jointer knives, grinding stones, shaper knives, mortising bits, dowel making machine for pins. They expressed a need for maintenance training. I explained that I taught design and function. Maintenance could be a part of that. They have the basics down however a little lax on safety. I think I made a good impression, especially when I solved a couple of their adjustment problems. Khamphoui was not feeling well, was a bit dizzy from a cold that had migrated into his inner ear. Hope he is all right and that is all it is. After Khamphoui dropped me off at the hotel I tried to get in to the old USAID compound at Na Hai Dio but the guard would not let me in. I walked there because I thought it was a short distance, but it was much longer than I remembered it being. Hot sun, got a little sunburned, over a km. One way. I used to drive all over Vientiane on a motorcycle. I never walked anywhere in Vientiane, so my estimates of distance and time are totally off the mark.

Had dinner at L'Opera again, and was not disappointed. I leave for the airport and Bangkok about 8:00 am.

Wednesday 12/26/07

Left Vientiane on time. Exit fee of \$10.00. So a total of \$40.00 government fees just for a visit. Met a Lao guy on the plane from Sam Neua who lives in San Diego. First time back in 25 years. Knew Pop and Blaine Jensen. Plane was absolutely full. Richard met me at the airport and gave me a ride in. He is going to look for another machinist, because the first one is way off the mark. Made a beautiful sample though. Met with Khun Apuntree. Not interested in buying what I have on hand with me. Need to pass it by their bosses first. Took one to look at and argued about the best price I could get them. We settled on \$10.50 they pay all the shipping. Called Mac and he will send the 4 I have here with me to Monument Books in Vientiane. Got a call from Marie, assistant to Charlie, Tada's son. Driver will pick me up about 1:30 Thursday afternoon for a look at their manufacturing facility, and then drop me off at the airport. Meeting with Tom in the am and lunch with Mac at 12:00 noon.

Called Wellie O'Driscoll of Pandora Furniture. Frank Manley speaks very highly of her. She seems to have things pretty well figured out. I will look at her web site to see if there are any possibilities. Not enough time on this trip to check out what she manufactures.

Thursday 12/27/07

Met with Tom about 10:00. He is working on getting some other parties to bid on parts. Gave him the rest of the samples. Everything seems to be very overpriced, but we both agree that this can be done and done reasonably. We shall see. If not, then I will try something else.

Mac, Sunee and I had lunch. It was a good way to thank him for all of the advice and help he had given. I left 4 copies of my book with him, and he will send them to Monument Books in Vientiane.

Tada's or I should say Maria's driver picked me up at the hotel just about 1:30. Off we went to their factory. Charlie, Tada's son was not there, but Maria showed me around and gave me some idea of what they can do, just about anything in furniture. It might be a good place to try some of my ideas, ie., my instant book case and my computer desk in the round. I asked Maria where she learned to speak English so well. She is a graduate of the University of Hawaii.

Left factory about 3:30 pm. for the airport and arrived there just about 5:00pm. Traffic is fierce. Plane took off 2 hours late. So being 2 hours early and leaving 2 hours late made for a very weary evening. Staff informed us that there was a technical problem so the flight was delayed. But I noticed that passengers kept coming, long after our plane was supposed to have taken off. So I suspect that there was a late connecting flight with many passengers that were scheduled for our flight. That was the technical problem. We finally took off about 9:30 pm and arrived in LA about 9:00 pm instead of 7:30 pm the same day. Weird. I had forgotten about the day lost and the day regained. Went through immigration and customs and left the Bradley terminal where I entered into Bedlam. The taxi line was very long over 100 bone weary people in line and there were no taxies in sight, so I walked over to American, the same. Went up the escalator to the departures and it was almost empty. I walked down to terminal 5 and called Gerry. It was very cold so I opened up one of my cases and pulled out and put on a sweatshirt, something I had brought with me because of Mac's warning that the cold season had arrived in Thailand. It was the first time I had needed it on the trip. Gerry arrived in about 20 minutes and said that the traffic for arrivals was all the way out to Sepulveda. We headed out of the airport and arrived home about 10 minutes later.

More Photos

https://photos.google.com/album/AF1QipM911k0aLGu9_ahcZL_nQ1JGQstLGBnyX8IUow