

# ASV ALUMNI ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

## January 2001

**BIG NEWS:** René Peeters has offered to host an ASV gathering in Dallas over the Labor Day weekend. No doubt good food and company will be in store!! More news will be forthcoming but mark your calendars now! As a hub for several airlines (including Southwest), inexpensive airfares should be available!! It's also only 3 or so hours from either coast! Those of you who went to Laos should plan to attend with your photos, videos & stories to share with those of us who couldn't make it.

**Message from the President:** First off, let me wish each and every one of you a very Happy New Year. How many of us can remember watching 2001: A Space Odyssey (for me that was at the Paramount Theater in Bangkok in 1969) and wondering what it would be like in the year 2001? Well, here we are in 2001 and Pan Am is not flying shuttles to the moon but there is a space station floating up there and some folks did make it back to Laos!

This newsletter attempts to share some of the experiences and thoughts that the 26 intrepid souls experienced during their October visit to Vientiane and points beyond. Many thanks to those who contributed thoughts, photos, and comments. We hope you enjoy the vicarious visit to Laos through their eyes! We've included a few printed ones here but costs have limited how many we could do. Don't miss the many other photos out on the web sites noted below!

The ASV "Geocities" web site remains a great archive of past alumni activities although it is not being updated on a regular basis. For more recent comments and some related files (i.e. photos) check out the e-groups site maintained by Kevin McGann and Kat McGann Harbinger has photos on it as well. Don't miss Bill Leonard's e-group site as well. You'll find the web addresses down further in the newsletter.

If you receive a paper copy of this newsletter, it is because we only have a US mail address for you. If you now have e-mail, PLEASE let us know so we can add you to the e-mail list. We send out a lot more information via e-mail than on paper due to cost. And don't forget to keep us updated on your address in any case. Every year we lose people and it's hard to find you again!!

As always you can reach me at one of the following addresses:

Snail mail - [REDACTED]

Phone - [REDACTED]

E-mail - [REDACTED]m

Regards, *Marcia Murto*

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## THE REUNION ATTENDEES

So who all went? With thanks to Sarah, Nina, Jill, Chris T. for their yearbook descriptions for Reunion participants:

1. Cindy Singleton - Best laugh; best accent; best chick moped driver.
2. Jill Michael - Most prepared flyer; wittiest; most tolerant; tied with Chris Sultan for most likely to move to Laos.
3. David Ostertag - Most likely to take a picture; tied with Chris Sultan for best peccs.
4. Jennifer Baniczky - Best sport for hanging out with a bunch of kids she didn't know before.
5. Dan Center - Best swimmer, "Be careful! Do not enjoying in this area strongly water"
6. Eve Center Stern - Tied with Susan Calhoun for sweetest.
7. Ron Orman - Best biker dude; most at peace with himself.
8. Chris Tovar - Most fun to be around; happiest Buddha!
9. James Tovar - Most likely to chat up the girls; best Asian suit.
10. Janet Christiansen Castelpietra - Best guide; most selfless; best twitcher; has best tuk tuk driver.
11. Wallace Fitzgerald - Best former class President; most walrus like.
12. Dennis Mitchell - Best Thai speaker
13. Susan Calhoun Voss - Tied with Eve Stern for sweetest.
14. Bill Leonard - Most likely to succeed; too bad he's still married!
15. Chris Sultan - Best boat hand; tied w/ Dave Ostertag for best peccs & w/ Jill M. for most likely to move to Laos.
16. John Graham - Man of fewest words.
17. Kathleen McGann Harbinger - Sweetest smile; tied with Jean Casucci for most recognizable.
18. Jack Primmer - Best dancer; "I built the road to Luang Prabang!" We're glad you came, Jack!
19. Mike Monnie - Best dad; best looking daughters.
20. Lloyd Coleman - Biggest phone bill; most likely to fall asleep while calling long distance.
21. Lee Ann Pixie Ross - Still the best lifeguard.
22. Doug Bonner - Safety on wheels; most likely to stick to the plan; tallest.
23. Frank Manly - Best story teller.
24. Nina Allen - Most likely to stop traffic; Joe who?
25. Hugo Allen - Ace videographer/karaoke star; worst karaoke song choices.
26. Jean Casucci Ross- Quickest Laos visit; tied with Kathleen Harbinger for most recognizable.

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## DONATION

As many of you may remember at the 1998 reunion, there was much interest in finding a suitable venue to make a donation in Laos in conjunction with the 2000 reunion. Thanks to Janet Castelpietra and Brinnie Ramsey who coordinated this effort.

The final total was \$2085.00 with 15 people donating. Two alums had offered matching funds up to \$500 so we had a good start. The donation went to WIG, a non-governmental organization in Vientiane that Janet recommended from her travels there. Our stipulation was that it be used 1) toward building a school, or 2) to help a school in need. Although we have confirmation of the receipt of our gift, we are still awaiting further details that we will share upon receipt. Thanks to all who contributed!

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## REFLECTIONS ON THE TRIP

### *(From LeAnn (Pixie) Ross)*

I found the visit to the museum in KM-6 particularly enlightening. The president had lived in a few of the houses on 5th street, one for his office and one for his residence. It seemed very strange to see the AID inventory numbers still on the furniture. He worked at one of the big executive desks and had his library in lots of the gray bookcases with glass windows.

More interesting was the museum that had been built on 4th street. It was basically a war museum, complete with pictures of the soldiers in the caves, the old style radios, folks in villages and such. There was a picture of the Party's first inauguration that was held in the gym at ASV. The Party was seated up on the stage. What struck me was how similar the museum was to one that we might have built if we had won the war. We'd have pictures of soldiers in the caves, old style radios, folks in villages and such. They fought for what they believed in as we did. They won, we lost. That's all.

I was also struck by how little life in Vientiane has changed both physically and culturally. As a tourist, I didn't feel that I was in a communist state. Life seems to go on. One could communicate with a smile. You smiled and they smiled back. Peaceful, laid back. There was a tranquility in Laos that permeated everything.

On the physical side, the Nahadio compound still stands as it did when we were all there. Run down but still there. The old AG building on stilts between the pool and the commissary, where I attended 6th grade before the school moved to K6, is still stands. There are a few new buildings on Lang Xang Avenue that are pretty much ugly concrete structures. The Lycee is still the Lycee. The Lao Plaza Hotel and the new Chinese Cultural Center on Samsenthai stick out like sore thumbs. But, overall, there isn't much in Vientiane today that wasn't there 25 years ago. There are so few places one can do this - go back in time. You certainly can't do that in Bangkok. Most of us would never even be able to find our way around Bangkok. I left Laos with a real feeling of having been out of the maddening race of 21<sup>st</sup> century daily life. Very therapeutic.

### *(From Bill Leonard)*

I visited the West Coast Helicopter charter service at the Vientiane airport, and talked to one of the Australian pilots. He mentioned he had a 1970's blue Camaro that was left by the Americans. Jill Michael heard about it, and it turns out that the car was her father's mid-life crisis car he bought on home leave one year. (Editor's note: Reason #18 of "25 Reasons why you have to go to the Reunion inn Laos this year - You want to see if your old car is still on the streets of Vientiane.")

### *(From Wally Fitzgerald)*

October 13, 2000: We (Dennis Mitchell, Doug Bonner, and I) awoke on the train about 2 hours from Nong Kai. We talked again about our expectations for the trip and what loomed ahead of us. We took pictures from the train and in Udorn and then finally we were in Nong Kai. A local Thai travel agency hired by Absolute Asia met us at the train station and got all of us through customs and immigration with a minimum wait. They were very professional and knew what they were doing especially since Dennis and I were the only ones on their list. We crossed the bridge into Laos and at that, boy, it finally hit me that I was half way around the world in Southeast Asia. We passed through the border process once again and we were off towards Vientiane on Thadua. We arrived at the Lao Plaza Hotel, which is a beautiful 6(?) story modern hotel. Of course we had already recognized many of the sites and started having flashbacks of those years long ago. At the hotel we met our travel advisor, Ms. Ping. Ping was born back in the US and returned to Laos not even speaking Lao. So thankfully for me, she spoke perfect English and did a tremendous job throughout our stay coordinating our group's activities.

A group of people had tried the day before to get into the K-6 compound unsuccessfully. Ping arranged a trip for us to the compound in the afternoon. At around 2:30 we piled into 3 tuk-tuks and away we went. 30 minutes later we were there at the gate to K-6. Ping talked to the guards at the gate and of course they didn't know anything of what we wanted so they would not let us in. They told us we were welcome to visit the museum to the first Prime Minister who died in 1992 (facts are sketchy for me because the museum information was all in Lao or parts in French, neither of which I speak). We went around the left side of the compound to a guard post located at 4th Street. We unloaded and began what for many would be a very emotional hour.

We walked down the street and toward the center of the compound and the first thing that struck us was the fact that all the houses on the outside of the interior perimeter road had completely been taken back by nature. The roofs were gone; the walls collapsed at places, weeds and brush everywhere. I had held hope that I would be able to see and maybe even visit my house on 6th Street, but seeing this I was beginning to have doubts. We walked down to the end of the street where the museum was located on the 5<sup>th</sup> Street side of 4th Street. Kathleen McGann pointed out her house that bordered the sports field. We were able to see the school buildings through the buildings and although many felt that the building had been rebuilt, I believe that the exterior gratings were removed and the exteriors cleaned and painted. The structures themselves were the same: the elementary portion, the high school, and Parenteau Hall. We went into the museum and it was one that was very tastefully dedicated to the Lao Prime Minister. The photos and exhibits detailed the Lao struggle toward their current independence without a lot of anti-Americanism (at least from what I could gather).

We were then lead to the housing behind the museum up on 5th Street. (A brief caveat here: I remember that when we lived downtown next to the radio station there was a coup attempt one afternoon in 1972. When I walked home that afternoon (we lived 2 blocks from the embassy), I was detained by the Royal Lao forces until the Embassy Guards came for me. The Ambassador ordered our family out of the house and into K-6.) I pointed out a house that we had stayed in temporarily before our house on 6th Street was ready. All of a sudden, the tour was heading towards that house and the house that housed the Jones (Ms. Jones the French teacher, I believe). From the museum guide these houses became the Prime Minister's home and office. We went through the first house (Jones') and it seemed that we were back in 1972.

The flooring, rugs and furniture were all as I remember them when we lived there. We went to the house we had stayed in and the whole purpose of the trip for me was realized. This trip was for me was one for me to remember the best memories I have of my father who passed away three years ago. I shed a tear for him there. We finished the tour and walked out of the compound via 5th Street. We could look up toward 6th Street but of course the jungle had taken that whole area back into itself. When we returned to the tuk-tuks our group was very quiet and I think everyone realized how events have changed and how much time has passed since we were last here.

*(From Dennis Mitchell)*

Well I made it to Laos. Vientiane has changed a lot but the Lao people have not changed at all. It was really wonderful, many of the old places are still there. Some run down but most have been really fixed up nicely. They have sure spent a lot of money on infrastructure. The city is 2-3 times the size it was when we were there. The city extends all the way to Thaduea with shops all the way to town. There must be at least 100 hotels and guest houses right down town. They made a lot of streets one way so traffic flows well even though there is a lot of road construction going on.

Well, the first day I got there our tour guide Ping got us into K6. We were only allowed on 4th-6th streets but could look back from 4th street and see where the school was. That is now a big beautiful government building of some sort. But I could see that the science building and water tower were still there. Most of the houses on 1st and 2nd street have been replaced with large buildings. On 4th-6th street most of the houses are still there (they are tearing down some of the outer ones). Fitzgerald's house on 5<sup>th</sup> St. became the Prime Minister's office, and the Jones' (I think) house was his residence. Those two houses are now shrines/museums, nothing has been touched or moved since he died. So they will probably be there forever

*(From Jennifer Baniczky)*

I was a bit anxious about returning especially having written my book, but it turned out that there was absolutely nothing to worry about. The people were as gracious and friendly as ever and I really felt that I could have more or less taken up life where I left off all those years ago and settled in for ever! I was particularly happy to find our old house, where a sister of our landlady now lives, and to find that the original family had moved to the States two years after we left.

My greatest happiness was to find my maid and her family. We had a wonderful reunion and couldn't stop laughing and crying and hugging each other -- once she got over the shock of my appearing out of nowhere 24 years later! I was happy to find her looking just the same, with five sons rather than the two she had had then and still working six days a week. It was definitely meant for us to meet again as I went to visit the one morning she has at home in the week. I have to return to Laos as I promised to return with my children for a proper visit, but I expect it will be in five years time as I have too many other places to visit in the meantime.

I was sorry to see that the space in front of the morning market where they sold fruit and veggies is now a parking lot. There are now just small markets here and there, and I never found any replacement for the large hall where they sold meat. But the interior of the buildings is a veritable Aladdin's cave of riches. When we left in 1976 there was little to buy -- even all the canned goods left when you all went were gone -- with empty or closed stores everywhere, now there is a super abundance of everything.

(Editor's note: Jennifer (under the name Jennifer Cook) has written an fictional adventure for younger readers, entitled "Flight Across the Mekong" based on her family's experiences after 1975 in Vientiane. As a Canadian, she remained after all of us had left. I found it a good read and you can get more information on it via Amazon.com.)

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## **WE'VE PRINTED SOME PHOTOS BUT CHECK OUT MORE ON THESE WEBSITES!**

Check the following web sites out for more news and pictures!

<http://www.eGroups.com/group/asv> (main ASV e-group – Kat McGann Harbinger has great photos) or at

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/asv/files/Laos+Reunion+2000/> (Yahoo and e-groups are merging)

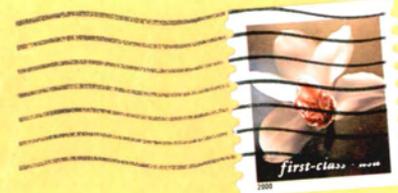
AND

<http://www.eGroups.com/files/ASV2000/> (Bill Leonard's photos including KM-6 and the old USAID compound) or

at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ASV2000/files/> (due to the Yahoo/e-groups merger)

# **SEE YOU IN DALLAS!!!!!!**

ASV Alumni Association  
c/o M. Murto  
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Apex, NC 27502

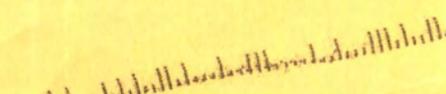


Woodson/Larry ( Khao Lao)



Address Correction Requested

65724+947



## REUNION 2000 IN VIENTIANE



A group shot



ASV as seen through the McGann's yard at KM-6



The Baci



5<sup>th</sup> Street at KM-6

## REUNION 2000 IN VIENTIANE



In front of the vertical runway



Building 100 (with windows now!) in the USAID compound



In front of the old ACA in the USAID compound



Looking up Lang Xang Ave from the top of the Monument

(Thanks to Bill Leonard and Kat McGann Harbinger for the photos)