



Seasons Greetings

Larry Woodson
Vientiane, Laos
December 14, 1964

Hello,

Probably the most significant thing that marked the month of November was the That Luang Festival. The That Luang Festival is important in that it marks the starting of the rice harvest. The festival was held in Vientiane and since the schools were closed I flew down to attend. The story of the festival goes back to India. It seems like a few thousand years ago Asoka, the Great, completed the erection of the 84,000 stupas he had built to house the Relics of Buddha and celebrated this achievement in the moonlight. Now in all Buddhist countries, festivals are being held on this date at the main thats which are supposed to contain a relic of the Blessed One...ashes, a hair, or an eyelash.

That Luang is located in the northern edge of Vientiane. The golden spire was completed in 1931...restored after being almost completely destroyed by Yunnanese pirates in 1837. The people of Vientiane and all of Laos gather to pay their respect to Buddha and to take part in the festivities of the Full Moon of the Twelfth Month. (Lao Calendar)

I did not attend the complete festival but I was impressed by the evening ceremony when long processions of monks carried candles made into scale models of the wat, with the faithful following behind. The procession is done to the tune of mournful sounds of gongs and drums.

During the festival the Greater Oath to the King is taken. After the people have gathered they proceed to the rhythm of a band made up of clarinets, flutes, and xylophones to Wat Ongtu. Here the ritual prayers are recited by the monks after which the master of ceremony dips the extremities of swords and rifles into alms bowls filled with lustral water and repeats three times the oath written on latania leaves.

All through the festival there are other religious ceremonies at which high ranking dignitaries preside, but over all is an air of gaiety.

Today there are a few things about the festival that remind me of a large fair. Most of the providences put up a booth to display various goods made in that particular area. These goods are also for sale. Major countries also set up exhibits which show some of the things that are happening in the various countries.

The final evening of the festival finds hundreds of the faithful carrying their offerings of candles and flowers and small wax Wats to the That, a calm returns to the festival grounds. The calm is short-lived for the next feature is the setting off of the rocket...they go off accompanied with loud bangs as their fuses and high-pitched whistles streak through the sky. Finally large multi-colored flares which flood the entire That with light giving the impression that, taller and slenderer than ever, it is rising toward the Blessed One to whom the whole country has shown veneration.

After the festival the rice season begins in earnest throughout Laos. The first rays of daylight find the Lao farmer out in his fields of rice along with his sickle and friends, those that he can get to help him. After taking off his shower clogs or tongs and covering his head with a towel-like cloth and a hat he proceeds to cut the rice. Taking two or more stands at a time with his left hand, he collects them toward the sickle, cutting just below his left hand with an upward flick of the wrist. When he has a handful, he lays it down on top of the remaining rice straw behind him making sure it does not touch the remaining water in the paddy. I found that I was concerned about cutting my finger while the Lao farmer paused only to pick off an occasional leach that are found in the mud and water around your feet.

After drying in the sun for some time the bundles are tied in pairs and hung over a bamboo pole resting on forked supports in the field. When the pole is full it is carried to a collecting area where he stacks it. The collecting area is one of the earlier cut paddies, usually situated under a shade tree if possible. All of the rice stubble is cut off clean, and a mixture of buffalo manure and water is placed evenly all over this space and left to dry and harden in the sun. Here is where the threshing takes place.

Take a board (crudely split log in their case) and suspend it on top of several stakes and you have a Lao thresher. Then take two, 1 inch thick pieces of smooth bamboo, $1\frac{1}{2}$ feet long and joined at the top with a piece of twisted bamboo or buffalo hide, one grabs a bundle of rice at the end away from the grain clamping the stalks between the handles. Lifting this over the head and slapping it down on the flat piece of wood knocks the rice grains off into a pile towards the middle of the threshing area. Most of the rice comes off following several sharp slaps. The bundle is flipped away then and another person re-bundles the thicker stems for feeding the buffalo later on.

The rice is transferred to large bamboo-woven baskets which fit into large wooden-wheeled carts, that are pulled by two oxen. It is then taken to small store houses which are like grain bins in the states except that they have bamboo walls and a rice straw roof.

I have been pretty busy lately trying to get a check list prepared for the students to use while they are doing their student observation. I have also helped construct two outdoor toilets at the demonstration school. I have also started collecting insects which I hope to put in a display case in the library. In the near future I hope to start getting collections of weeds and crops. We are presently trying to get the school library organized. We will have to build

several shelves and make cards for the books. Last week we were able to get an army motor grader to come out and level several places around the campus. One of the areas will be developed into a basketball court and I hope to organize intramural leagues within the school. There is no limit to the things that need to be done around the school.

On Saturday afternoons and Sundays I have taken several short trips. One of these was with the Missionaries to a nearby leper village. The village is about 15 miles down the Mekong from Luang Prabang. A Colombo doctor usually goes down also but on this occasion he was out of town. Following a short church service they started treating the feet and hands of the lepers.

The lepers are treated by cutting away the dead skin until blood is reached. The area is then covered with a salve and bandaged. Around the cancerous sores on their hands and feet they have no feeling. Because of the lack of feeling they accidentally step on glass and other things that damage the feet without their knowing it. It has been found that during the night rats chew off toes and fingers. Several of them had stubs instead of feet or fingers. It usually just effects the hands, feet and nose. The bridge of the nose rots away and as a result they have a very flat nose. The rotten skin also gives off a very bad odor which is almost sickening. On the return trip I was reminded of the following phrase: "I once complained because I had no shoes then I met a man that had no feet".

Contrary to what you might think I had a very enjoyable Thanksgiving here in Luang Prabang. All of the Americans here in Luang Prabang (some 14 of us) had dinner together. We were able to get a 21 pound turkey from Vientiane, so we had turkey with all the trimmings, including pumpkin pie. We also invited three Englishmen to join us. We had a large dinner at which everybody managed to eat too much followed by a softball game for those who wanted to sacrifice their nap. We all regrouped in the evening for another meal and a short service. I think everybody went home wishing they had not eaten that extra helping of pie and ice cream, including myself.

Since this will be my last newsletter in 1964, I would like to take this opportunity to wish each of you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Sincerely yours,

Larry Woodson

Correction in address as of January 1, 1965.

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San Francisco, California 96352

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