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FROM: Henry C. Holmes, IVS Education Adviser, Teacher-Training
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SUBJECT: End of Tour Report, September 20, 1964

THROUGH: Mr. Dwane E. Hammer, A/C, USAID/RDD, Luang Prabang

Background of the Luang Prabang Teacher-Training Project.

First plans for a teacher-training school in Luang Prabang originated in the Lao National Education Reform Act of 1958. That reform, in which the American government was influential, directed a new effort toward education in the villages, which at that time needed some 12,000 new teachers in order to supply one for every 35 school-age children. Because of the village context, much emphasis in the new educational thought was directed toward a new "more useful instruction... more practical instruction... more vital instruction... more unified instruction."* The Ministry of Education's new program in 1962 called for a high degree of practical work in addition to traditional subjects, based on "centers of interest" to be found in the village itself and its surroundings.

Many of the hopes expressed in the Education Reform have remained fond dreams, unfortunately, since there are almost no teachers who are familiar with the new goals nor the new pedagogy which must accompany them. The three teacher-training schools in Pakse, Luang Prabang, and Vientiane were built to remedy this need at its source, the teacher supply.

The Luang Prabang Teacher-Training School, 1962-1963.

The school at Luang Prabang, built to serve the north of Laos, was completed in mid-1962, and the finishing touches of construction were among the first responsibilities of George Ridenour, IVS/VARDA, who arrived in July to work as counterpart to the Lao director, Tiao (Prince) Chanthavady.

The school was really fortunate in the Ministry's choice of a director. Although by no means a physically imposing man, and with only a ten-year education, it is the quality of his education which is important. He was a student for two years at a teacher-training school in Thailand (Pitsanulok), and spent another at the school for fundamental educators in Vientiane. He remains something of a villager at heart, and enjoys considerable popularity and influence in the capital city.

Ridenour helped the director plan and install the school water supply, two septic tanks, gravel walks, and a quarter-mile of fence. Together they also organized the class schedules and activity programs for students, so that when school opened late in November, 1962 (they were waiting for desks and tables to arrive by river boat from Vientiane), the daily life of the school got off to a remarkably good start.

* Letter from Lao Minister of Education to The Primary Inspectors, July, 1962.

Shortages of Teaching Materials and Teachers.

At that time almost no teaching materials existed in Lao on any subject. None existed at all which were designed specifically for the new "centers of interest" curriculum, nor were there any for use specifically by the teacher-training schools. George Ridenour was persuaded by the director, because of the shortage of Lao teachers, to teach science, hygiene, and practical gardening work. His main effort was to develop original science and hygiene lessons and supervise their translation into Lao, to be used as makeshift textbooks in his own courses.

When I arrived in December, 1962, with two months of formal training in Lao, I took on three other teaching responsibilities, as yet unfilled by the Lao staff. This also required producing materials in Lao in rural arts, animal husbandry, and physical education. At first the director seemed to look upon this feverish preparation of lessons as a kind of American fetish, partly since the quality of written Lao used by our shared assistant was substandard, a fact we did not know at the time. Chanthavady has only recently begun to encourage the practice of lesson-writing among the Lao staff, but their preparation and use of materials remain most haphazard.

IVS continued to provide mechanical and other technical advice in addition to teaching services during the first year, as well as the liaison between the school and USAID, whose day-to-day help was almost constant since Lao Ministry support was not well organized at that time.

The first year of the project was, on balance, successful from many points of view. Students maintained gardens and a pig project throughout the year, and kept the school clean by themselves. At least in these respects we succeeded in meeting the expectations of the Education Reform. Student spirit was high (they even wrote a song about the life of the student teacher, which is still played on the local radio), and the director seemed to gain confidence in the honest intentions of IVS to assist him in various ways. The content of the one-year program, however, was little more than a light brush with seventeen-odd subjects in the course of study. This same program, though somewhat better organized now, remains essentially the same as we enter our third year this fall.

The 1963-1964 School Year.

During the most recent school year, my principal effort went toward finding Lao people to do all the classroom teaching at the school, in so doing replacing IVS teachers. With George Ridenour gone, this left a large gap, but talent was found among the various provincial extension agents, notably in agriculture, to fill our shoes most satisfactorily in most of the subjects we had taught. The agriculture man, for example, wrote original material for his own course, is revising it this year, and is taking on the animal husbandry course as well.

Several diversions arose during the year, particularly the construction of a "demonstration school", a model village school used by our students for practice teaching, and built by a really inexperienced local contractor under appalling difficulties. The director also had some personnel problems, which combined to prevent him from taking as large an interest in the purely academic life of the school as I had hoped for in our second year. Our close association on the construction work, however, led to an even more congenial working relationship between us.

One special project has been to interest the director in maintaining school buildings and equipment, a business which is traditionally neglected by the Lao. We worked out a year-by-year plan for repairs, painting, and inventories, and this summer Chanthavady put most of the school laborers onto this job and has followed it up to the end. If he could bring this kind of leadership to our academic problems, the school would really prosper.

Present State of the Project.

The education picture in northern Laos has changed drastically since the Reform of 1958. At that time, there were many teacher-less villages in free areas, this fact being the central motivation for a hurry-up one-year program. Since then, free areas have become much fewer, with the result that our graduates have few places in this region where they can be sent. Indicative of this situation is the fact that five of this June's graduates were finally assigned to Savannakhet.

Under these circumstances, it seems an ideal time to consider establishing a sound four-year program here, with new teaching materials to go with it.

Most promising is the fact that both the IVS and USAID Education Division part in the school's daily operation has become less constant and less indispensable. IVS no longer handles direct teaching, and many of USAID's old support jobs are now performed by the Lao Ministry of Education. Communication between the school director and his chiefs in Vientiane seems to be improving.

IVS' most important and difficult job, as I see it, is to influence the director to improve standards of teaching among the school staff and in the demonstration school, where student-teachers do their practice teaching. I have often enough made suggestions about making visits to classes, organizing staff conferences about methods, and asking for lesson plans or other preparations from the teachers. So far almost no results have come from this. A partial explanation for this is the press of administrative matters, most of which he handles by himself. But more fundamental, I think, is an aversion within the Lao system to enter, interfere with, or criticize other people's teaching. Chanthavady may also lack confidence in himself as an adviser to others about teaching methods. It is certainly a delicate business in any country.

One way of getting around this difficulty which seems effective is the Participant Training Program for teachers. Where both Chanthavady and IVS may find ourselves hamstrung about making direct innovations in pedagogy here, a few months of immersion in Thailand seems to really work. All three of our staff members whom we recommended for training have returned with new ideas and enthusiasm about doing a better teaching job. Of these, a nine-month science grant has been particularly successful.

I have been really fortunate during the last two years in that I have had two bosses - IVS/VARDA (my contract organization) and the USAID Education Division. Material support from VARDA has been almost impeccably prompt and thorough. USAID's Community Education Advisers have worked under really provoking difficulties to improve human relations among the Lao themselves, and we feel the benefit as the school director gains confidence in his own ministry, as well as confidence in the good intentions of his American friends.

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