

MEKONG EXPRESS MAIL



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Back to Laos!

By Glenn Black and Vaughan Smith, TLCB Assistance Team, Thailand

For the first Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood (TLCB) post-COVID school visit, our team consisted of Vaughn Smith, Glenn Black, and Charlie Moua and his wife Rosie, who joined the Brotherhood in 2016. He was a Field Operation Liaison Officer at Long Tieng, LS20A, and a friend of the late Mac Thompson. We visited three schools in the Kham District of Xiangkhouang Province in early December of last year. The following is our report on that adventure.

Monday 5 Dec22: Ban Tha School, Kham District, Xiangkhouang Province

Also known as Muang Ton School, Ban Tha School is one of six damaged in a hailstorm during the 2022 rainy season. High winds and hail damaged the roofs of six schools rendering them unusable until repairs were made. Four of the schools were repaired by the Laos government, but two were overlooked and were referred to the TLCB to fund the repairs. The Ban Tha Village Muang Ton School is the first of the two schools that the TLCB agreed to fund. Since this motion was approved and funded, we have learned that TLCB money was used to help

three, not two schools. We planned to visit these other two schools during our March 2023 trip.

The school location is 67 kms from Phonsavan on Route 7 and north on Route 1-C; the elevation is 3,934 feet.

We were on our way to Ban Tha School driving east down Route 7 to Muang Kham, also known as Ban Ban during the war. Muang Kham is the district center, about 66 Kms from Phonsavan. At the crossroads of Muang Kham, we turned north

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Vaughan Smith and Charlie Moua view the mountains of Northeast Laos as they head up country to visit schools the TLCB has helped. Photos sent by Glenn Black.

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Editor's Notebook

This issue of the *Mekong Express Mail (MEM)* celebrates several unique and notable aspects of the Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood (TLCB). On page one, we open with a long and fascinating look at our work with schools in Laos by Glenn Black and Vaughn Smith. Because of travel restrictions due to the Covid pandemic, it has been several years since the TLCB has been able to monitor the progress of our work there. It is certainly gratifying to see that our funds are being well used and certainly appreciated. Related closely to our school projects is the scholarship program. The last two graduates of it are featured on page 12. On a personal note, it was the educational programs that convinced me to join the TLCB.

On the last two pages of this issue is a preview of the 2023 TLCB Reunion, set for September 14 to 16 in St. Paul, Minnesota. The Reunion is always special, but this year's is likely to be even more so. The Twin Cities – Minneapolis and St. Paul – have an especially large population of Hmong people, refugees of the "Secret War," and the reunion will feature some unique activities with leaders of their community.

Oh wait! A third special achievement in this issue is the list of new members, probably the largest number that we have reported in some time. This increase is attributable to two people: Ray Boas, whose producing of our Facebook page reaches many non-members, who often become real members, and also driving our membership uptick is the work of Thelma Tilton, who promotes TLCB membership aggressively when fulfilling orders from our Exchange.

Good work!

John Harrington
MEM Editor
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Error Correction

In the March 2023 issue of the *Mekong Express Mail*, the article about the Karen people of Thailand (page 15), by Bill Tilton, incorrectly identified villagers in the photos as Karen. Our new Hmong friends in St. Paul have advised us that these photos depicted residents of a Hmong village. We thank the Secret Guerilla Unit Veterans and Families, and Prof. Lee Pao Xiong, Ph.D., in particular, for catching this error.



What is it? Here's a detail from the Hmong Memorial on the grounds of the Capitol of Minnesota. See page 15 to learn much more about the 2023 Reunion.

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Reunion 2023: St. Paul, Minnesota

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on Route 1C, a sealed road which continues north and meets Route 6 to Samneua. Route 7 continues east to Vietnam. During the war, it had continual use by the People’s Army of Vietnam, and was another area that was intensively bombed. We visited the market in Muang Kham and bought bananas and snacks and headed north to Ban Tha School, arriving by late morning.

I had previously visited the school some years back with Mac and Auke, and I recalled that there were two quite deep bomb craters in front of the school. We played frisbee with the kids around one of them. The principal was a lady and there were seven teachers present, but no community leaders. The English teacher remembered me. The principal spoke some English and assured us that her school and locals were very appreciative of the TLCB’s assistance. We could see that the community had done a good job of replacing the roof and the work was in conformity with the original proposal.

Everyone convened in the school for introductions, and



Ban Tha School and its new TLC Brotherhood roof. Note the old bomb crater in the foreground, as noted years ago by the late Mac Thompson.

Vaughan and Ajan Soundeuan both introduced themselves and explained our visit. The Lao school authorities introduced themselves and we all got down to the business of signing the handover documents. After which, we gave sports equipment to the students, and went outside for a great photo of the teachers, our gang, and kids holding the TLCB banner. The frisbee throwing began in earnest and the kids were fast learners.

We went back inside for the Baci ceremony, beginning with the lighting of candles and chanting. Baci strings were tied around our wrists as a gesture of thanks and wishes of good will. After the Baci, the food came out, a lot of chicken and ‘jaow,’ a fiery chili repast. After eating, the girl students

Vaughan Smith and school officials sign the funds handover documents.



Above, schoolkids waiting for the program to start.

Below, Charlie Moua handing out sports equipment brought by the team.



The Ban Tha students present traditional Hmong dancing for the TLCB team

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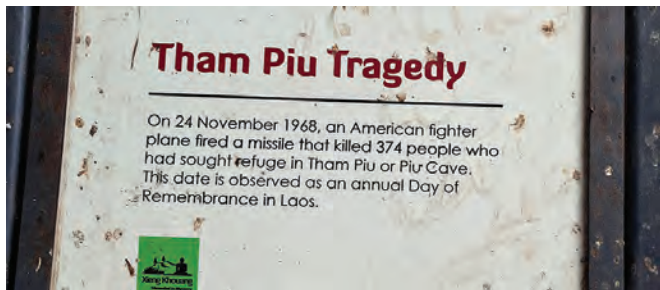
treated us to a traditional Hmong dance, and then we were invited outside to sample some Lao Hai (rice wine) as the kids played with their new sports equipment.

Monday 5 Dec 22: Visit to Tham Piu Cave

We left early in the afternoon and went to a place that Charlie and Rosie wanted to see, the Tham Piu Cave site, a park dedicated to 372 civilians who lost their lives there during



The famous cave near Ban Ban (now called Tam Piu). This was a key site during the Secret War in Laos, between the Royal Lao and the PAVN and PLA...



Above, tourist information plaque near the cave mouth. Below, inside the cave—both shelter and munitions storage depot!



the war. It had been a shelter for the Pathet Lao and the Lao farmer families. The site was then known as Ban Ban, and got a lot of attention from the USAF and the Royal Lao Air Force. The Hmong flew Air Force T-28s based at LS-20A. The PAVN/Pathet Lao stored a lot of war materials in the cave, and the villagers sought refuge there from the bombing during the daytime. On 23 November 1968, a fighter shot at a target near the area and the missile blew away the trees that obscured the entrance to the cave. A missile entered the cave and set off the considerable munitions stored within and killed at least 372 civilians, per the park's info posters. While there also were undoubtedly a few Pathet Lao or PAVN soldiers inside the cave, the victims were primarily Lao farmers and their families.

6 Dec 22: Ban Houai Awm School

This primary school is located in Phou Kout District, Xiangkhouang Province, which is 61.8 Kms from Phonsavan; the village is at 3,661 feet above sea level.

The community is all ethnic Khmu. In the morning, Somphou picked up Ajan Soundeuane, then the rest of us for the trip to Ban Houai Awm School. We arrived mid-morning and were greeted by the school and village authorities. During the greetings, some local adults, likely parents, were playing an intense game of takraw in front of the school. One of the



The school building at Ban Houai Awm. Our roof looks great, and inside is looking good too, below.



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The schoolkids readily caught on to Frisbee throwing and it quickly became very popular. This scene was at Ban Houai Awm Primary School.

onlookers was a constable with a rifle on his back, which we normally don't encounter during school visits. He remained in the background during the entire ceremony. A community safeguard?

The repaired school was constructed of wood, had good cement floors, and good school desks and other furniture. Outside there was a clean, two-holer latrine, one side for girls and the other side for the boys.

As I was listening to the introductions during the handover ceremony, I noted that the Lao authorities refer to the Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood as "Samakhom Mittaphap Thai Lao Kampuchea," with Samakhom equaling Association or Foundation, and Mittaphap equaling friendship, comradeship, amity, cordiality, concord. In Laos, they still refer to Cambodia as Kampuchea.

Charlie and Rosie had chats with the children and teachers. They made the introductions in Lao and Hmong language, and Vaughan spoke in Thai, which is understood pretty much by all Lao people with access to a TV since much of the Laos TV content is in Thai.

In the classroom, there was a photo of Mines/UXO Awareness poster behind the children. This poster is a feature of all schools and necessary at nearly every school in Laos, especially on or around

Rosie and Charlie at the Lao Hai jar, containing aged-underground rice wine and sipped as a ceremonial obligation. You can share your germs, but you are not likely to get even a "buzz" from this drink. As the jug gets low they just add water.



the Plain of Jars (PDJ).

The school authorities said that they needed a dormitory because some of the students come from as far as 15 kms away, and a lot of them come up from their homes even farther down the valley. This is a common necessity at a lot of remote schools. Dorms are managed by the community leaders and schoolteachers and the community ensures the welfare of the children during their week at the school. They return home on the weekends. In some schools with dorms that we have seen (or built), the children are taught to grow garden vegetables.

As usual the Frisbees were a hit, at least for the first 45 minutes, then the children turned their attentions to the volleyball and soccer balls. The older kids had relented and had departed the volleyball court so the children could play.

Wednesday 7 Dec 22: Ban Nakhouan Primary School

Located in Phou Kout District, Xiangkhouang Province, Laos, this school is at/ 3,694 feet.

The job was for roof sheets and plywood ceiling replacement on an existing school; the area of the school is 46 X 8 Meters. The material acquisition and transport were paid by the TLCB, and the aluminum roof sheets and plywood for the ceilings were installed by village labor.

Ban Nakhouan is located near the turnoff to Ban Houai Awm and appears more prosperous. A Korean donor

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One of the greatest dangers to children in Laos is unexploded ammunition left over from the war (called UXO, for unexploded ordnance). All schools have awareness posters like this. The MEM has often mentioned UXO clearing operations.

Below, ceremony at Ban Ham Hom Primary School. At far left is Mr Soundeuane Samsamai, a regional official who was Mac Thompson's contact in Laos from the beginning. Vaughan Smith is second from right, and the other three gentlemen are officials in Ban Nam Hom.

constructed the schools, which have a good appearance. One building was covered with tin roof sheets that were treated with a rust inhibiting paint and had held up well. For some reason the second building did not get rust free paint and the roof sheets became damaged and leaked onto the ceiling plywood, warping it.

Two years passed since the work took place, a result of Covid. The installation of the roof sheets appears to have been a good job, and the school principal mentioned that initially there had been some leakage, but that the leaks were located, and sheets properly put into place. Vaughan noted that it would be desirable to find ceiling plywood that can withstand the elements better, if the product exists in the local markets.

The handover ceremony went according to custom and was concluded with the handing out of sports equipment — volley balls and soccer balls, plastic takraw balls, frisbees, and balls for smaller students. A luncheon followed, and afterward, the students performed some dances, and our group returned to Phonsavan.

Thursday 8 Dec 22 Ban Nam Hom Primary School

Kham District, Xiangkhouang Province, Laos

The school is 54 x 8 meters in area, including the corridor, and the job was to replace tin roof sheets with aluminum roof sheets and repair the ceilings. The proposal was that the TLCB grant \$2,570 to buy tin, nails, plywood, paint, and pay for their transport to repair the roofing and ceilings of the dilapidated Ban Nam Hom Primary School, which is a semi-permanent building built in 2004 with funding from the Korean Bouyong Fund and with labor provided by the villagers. It has five classrooms and one teachers' room. The school's roof had deteriorated and leaks caused damage to the ceilings of the rooms.

The school has six teachers, four women and two men. Of the 96 students, 47 are girls. There is also a kindergarten class for children at the school. Students from two smaller villages

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Kids lined up at Ban Pho Hawk School, with Rosie Moua speaking to them. This school was a first for our Assistance Program, in that the team found that TLCB-furnished materials had been received, but not yet used, probably because of the vital harvest season. Of course our team will follow this one closely.

nearby also attend the school. In the three villages, there are 178 families.

The kids were sitting in the reception room and tables were at the ready when we arrived. The local principal, Vaughan, Ajan Soundeuane, and Charlie and Rosie made the introductory remarks. After some frisbee, we went back inside for the Baci and then lunch. The 'Lao Hai' came out and was sampled by Charlie, Rosie, and me. We don't always see it at schools, but on this trip, it was served at several of the schools. It signifies that the locals put all their efforts towards goodwill that they could muster. It tastes something like Japanese Sake. It's mild and pleasant tasting, and I should also mention that lunch was great as well, with chicken, jaow, sticky rice, and local soups with vegetables and fish.

Friday 9 Dec 22: Motion 22-15: Ban Pha Kawk Primary School

The school is located 70.6 kms from Phonsavan, in Kham District, Xiangkhouang Province, Laos. The job was to buy roofing sheets to replace leaky roofing sheets and cement to lay floors. The Pha Kawk Village Primary School is in a remote village, and the school has 158 students of whom 74 are girls.

All are of Hmong background. The school has eight teachers, two of them women, and the village has 222 families located across two areas. The school, of rudimentary design, was built by the villagers from wood from local sources and has endured for over 30 years. The school is under the supervision of the Kham District Education Office. The building for which they were requesting aid is wood construction with tin roofing and measures 8 x 27 meters, including the corridor. The funds were requested for roofing tin, roofing nails, cement, sand, and gravel flooring, with labor provided by the villagers.

This school site was quite remote, although Pha Kawk is a fairly large village. The school principal, teachers, students, and village authorities awaited us. Tables were set up and everything was ready, but there was something odd about this school site. We checked the school buildings and realized that hardly any of the work had been done. Vaughan determined that the materials had been received. We looked inside the storage room of one of the school buildings where the roof sheets and cement were stored. The sand was in a pile on the grounds and had become a sandpit for the children to play in. The only work

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completed was a new cement floor for the school's principal.

The school received its funds on 3 November, just a month before our visit, but because it was harvesting season, none of the villagers were available for construction. So, our trip there was kind of a bust. Nevertheless, a handover ceremony was conducted since the materials had been received. Also, the villagers' future efforts were assured. We gave the kids the sports equipment, and this seemed a big deal for them. We did our frisbee training and were treated to an excellent lunch. The school authorities were properly appreciative, but we remained a little perplexed. The location is relatively isolated so the community is largely self-reliant and must have had higher priorities. We departed with the expectation that we would soon see some evidence of the completion of the work.

Since Vaughan took over after Mac's illness and death in 2018, this was the first time we visited a school with the work so incomplete. Ajan Soundeune is following up efforts at the school at the time of this writing.

Now for some trivia.

The school site at Pha Kawk was not uninteresting, and while walking around I noted something I've seen again and again at remote schools in Laos and Cambodia where people have resettled after a war. That is the school bell. Often it is fashioned out of war trash. In Cambodia the exploded remains of a 107 mm rocket was often used. This rocket has a long casing and with the warhead on the end and 2/3 of the rocket containing the propellant. After it exploded, the remains of the rocket resemble a peeled banana. In Laos I've seen empty/inert 4.2 mortar rounds being used as school bells in at least at one school. School bells also are made from pieces of fallen bombs. That old iron makes for a great ringer and is good for little else so they might as well use it for school bells.

Pha Kawk school had a bell made from something I had never seen before. It looked like the remains of a two-bladed helicopter rotor. There were connections at each end that appeared attachments for holding the prop blades and a broken piece of aluminum hanging off one end. The steel hub of the "bell" looks like it would ring well. Or maybe I'm way off and the ring and connectors do not belong to an aircraft at all. The twisted steel that the ring is attached to looks too heavy, and so much half inch steel is unlikely to be on an aircraft, so maybe



War trash school bell. Inhabitants of the war zones of Laos have made many uses of scrap and debris left from the years of intense ground and air warfare there. Sometime this has had tragic consequences when unexploded ordnance is inadvertently set off, very often by children who are either using the trash for playthings or are collecting scrap to sell. We have seen backyard foundaries where people were casting utensils from aircraft aluminum found in Laos. This "bell" is clearly not made from aircraft parts. The authors suggest that a sharp-eyed *MEM* reader may be able to identify the source.

it came from something else that got blown up. Anyway, like many remote schools around the Plain of Jars and the corridor from Muang Kham/Ban Ban to the Vietnamese border, Pha Kawk School uses a piece of war trash as a school bell. Maybe some of our *MEM* readers might have a clue.

NOTE: In a future issue we will publish the rest of the story of this journey, with side-trips to sites of special interest to our readers. Ed.



HOW THE HMONG CAME TO BE IN THE U.S.

By Lionel Rosenblatt, with inputs from the late MacAlan Thompson

The source paper was presented to the Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University – St. Paul in July 2015, and this article is extracted for the *Mekong Express Mail (MEM)* by permission from Lionel Rosenblatt.

Why the Lao Hmong became refugees

In early 1975, the US-supported governments in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos began to collapse. By early April, prodded by a group of young State Department officers, an Interagency Task Force was formed at the State Department in Washington

to evacuate Vietnamese who would be at "high risk" if Cambodia and Vietnam fell. Congressional authority to admit up to 150,000 Indochinese was granted under what was known as "parole authority." A few Cambodians were evacuated before Phnom Penh fell. On April 30, the government of South Vietnam fell as North Vietnamese troops entered Saigon. A total of more than 100,000 Vietnamese were evacuated by air and sea to Guam and the Philippines, and then to the U.S.

Hmong continues next page

Meanwhile, in Laos the situation was also deteriorating, somewhat more gradually. In May some 3,000-3,500 Hmong were evacuated by air from Long Tieng to Nam Phong, an air base in northeast Thailand. General Vang Pao and his family members were evacuated to Udorn; the general went on to the U.S. a short time later. A key organizing role was played by General Harry C. "Heinie" Aderholt, chief US military officer in Bangkok, and our own Les Strouse was involved (See the *MEM* for March 2003, page 1, "The last nerve-wracking flight out of Laos," by Les Strouse and reprinted on page 13 of the June 2015 issue).

Additional Hmong refugees made their way south from Long Tieng and other areas to the Mekong River and crossed into Thailand. About 8,000 were moved on to Nam Phong, but the latecomers were held up at Nong Khai. Later in the fall of 1975, a refugee camp was opened in Nong Khai to house lowland Lao, Thai Dam, Hmong, and some other highlander refugees from Laos. This camp was operated by the Thai Ministry of Interior with support from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with funding from the U.S. and other governments.

Hmong and other refugees from Laos were also flowing into a number of smaller camps in the northern Thai provinces of Nan and Chiang Rai.

CIA officer Jerry Daniels and USAID staffers Mac Thompson and John Tucker, who all served in Laos during the war, set up a small operation at the U.S. Consulate in Udorn, initially to process Thai Dam refugees, but also to report on the Lao and Hmong refugee situation. This included approximately 1,200 Hmong. During a late September visit to Nam Phong, regional director Sam Feldman, based in Hong Kong, was so impressed with meeting Dr. Yang Dao and Hmong SGU officers, medics, and nurses that he telephoned INS headquarters in Washington and got permission to admit them. There was not, however, any thought of admitting Hmong refugees to the U.S. after this time. The processing of these refugees was done by the office in Udorn and one that was set up in Bangkok.

Refugee Issue Recognized

In August, Lionel Rosenblatt who was head of the Office of Special Concerns on the Interagency Task Force in Washington, received word that a substantial number of refugees were entering Thailand from Cambodia and Laos. A Cambodian staff member passed along photos of some Cambodian refugees who had been killed in one of the border encampments. Armed with this evidence, Julia Taft, head of the Task Force, authorized Rosenblatt to survey the refugee situation in Thailand and report back to her. In early autumn 1975, on a last-minute trip to Nam Phong camp, which was organized by Mac Thompson and Jerry Daniels, Rosenblatt was introduced to the Hmong refugees there, including many who had worked directly for

the U.S. government in the war years or in the US-supported Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) forces; a significant number were so essential that they had been assigned U.S. government radio callsigns. Dr. Yang Dao presented Rosenblatt with a copy of his history of the Hmong which was translated by the U.S. government from French into English and was very useful in raising awareness about the Hmong within the U.S. government and Congress.

Rosenblatt sent a telegram from Bangkok with his findings to Task Force chief Julia Taft, who courageously acted to preserve



Hmong refugees embroidered "story cloth" histories of their trek to the camps in Thailand and sold them for one dollar. This typical cloth shows the villagers being chased from their homes by soldiers and planes, swimming across the "Mae Kong River," and being met by other soldiers.

the unused admission numbers and budgetary funds from 1975 to admit an additional 11,000 Indochinese refugees under the April 1975 parole, despite considerable pressure to end the Indochinese resettlement program when the camps in the U.S. were emptied and closed in late 1975. Mrs. Taft said that "history would not look kindly on us" if we did not admit refugees in Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia who had close associations with the U.S.

Accordingly, Foreign Service officer Shep Lowman assigned Rosenblatt to Thailand as Refugee Coordinator to manage the program, which came to be known as the Expanded Parole Program (EPP). Mac Thompson supervised all U.S. refugee work on behalf of those

fleeing Laos, devising a point system to measure the association of each refugee head of family with the U.S., based on having relatives already in the U.S. and service with the U.S. government or U.S. entities such as the SGU. Jerry Daniels applied this point system to the Hmong caseload.

Resolving the Refugees' Destiny

In early 1976, Rosenblatt and Daniels arranged a pivotal meeting with Hmong leadership to learn their wishes for their people's future. The Hmong leaders opened the meeting by asking that the U.S. thereafter refer to them as Hmong, meaning "free men or people," and not Meo with its "savage" connotation, which had been used during the war years in Laos. Next, the Hmong leaders asked that the U.S. government provide them weapons to take and hold Sayaboury province in Laos, as a place for them to live, which some claimed had been promised. The U.S. side stated that this was not a viable option. The next choice of the Hmong leaders was for them to be re-grouped in an area of Thailand where they could live on their own, which was not likely to be agreeable to Thailand.

The Hmong leaders' third choice was to resettle in a third country, all living together. The U.S. side indicated that this would not be feasible, but that we would work toward getting U.S. government approval toward giving Hmong, with close associations to the U.S., the opportunity to resettle

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here. If approved, Hmong would be dispersed around the United States with the voluntary agencies finding sponsors for each family, as was done for other Indochinese refugees commencing in April 1975. But no family would be forced to apply for U.S. resettlement. With some reluctance, the Hmong agreed to these terms.



Detail from story cloth on page 9

The Huge Selection Process

Selection for this resettlement was based on association with the U.S., using Mac's point system. All of the 11,000 refugees had to be selected by the U.S. refugee office and approved by INS prior to June 30, 1976, the end of the U.S. government fiscal year at that time. When the Thai Airways flight from Bangkok to Nan departed early, leaving the interview team (led by Rosenblatt and Daniels) and its files stranded in Bangkok, General Aderholt provided them a military plane. Opening a file on each refugee family, prioritizing them according to the point system, and presenting them to INS for approval, involved a tremendous amount of paperwork initially in the camps, and then in Udorn and Bangkok, and involved transporting trunkloads of files at each stage.

Because there were officials in Washington who had raised doubts about the suitability of Hmong and other Highlanders for resettlement in the U.S., the team concealed the fact that of the roughly 7,500 approvals for refugees from Laos, about two thirds were Highlanders.

At one point, U.S. Vice President Walter Mondale offered the Thai government two million dollars to resettle some of the Hmong in Thailand. The offer inadvertently became public and was promptly rejected by the Royal Thai government. Ultimately, about 105,000 Highlanders from Laos came to the U.S. Spurred in large part by the U.S. admission of Hmong, about 10,000 Hmong were also resettled from Thailand to other countries, principally France, including the settlement in French Guiana, which took in a small amount of Hmong starting in 1975, and 3,000 to Australia and Canada.

Concerns About Hmong Adaptability

There was some continuing reluctance in the U.S., including in the Congress, to resettling large numbers of Hmong on the grounds that they would not assimilate well, that they were "illiterate" (as opposed to pre-literate), and not adaptable to western living. The State Department held firm and the Hmong proved that they could adapt successfully to the U.S. in locations across the country. Tens of thousands more Hmong "self-resettled" in Thailand, including some families who chose this rather than going to the U.S. A significant number of Hmong who tried to escape to Thailand from Laos were killed by communist forces in Laos or drowned trying to cross the Mekong. Thai authorities generally permitted the Hmong to enter Thailand, though there were exceptions, and most Hmong arriving across the river were stripped of any valuables. U.S. officials played an active role in monitoring and trying to assist the new arrivals.

In 1982, Jerry Daniels died in Bangkok while still in service with the U.S. refugee office there. He is still revered by the Hmong and his American colleagues for his work in Laos and in the refugee program.

In the early 1990s a small group of Hmong were repatriated back to Laos under UNHCR aegis. Resettlement support for them in

Laos was very poor. During that time the remaining Hmong refugees in camps in Thailand were re-grouped at Na Pho camp in Nakhon Phanom province. From there subsequent voluntary repatriation to Laos awaited those Hmong who had not opted to resettle abroad (or had been rejected).

An informal settlement of tens of thousands of Hmong grew up at Wat Tham Krabok in Saraburi province in central Thailand. In 2003, about 15,000 of this group were offered an option to resettle in the U.S. The Thai Abbot of the Wat was very sympathetic to the Hmong and helped protect them, assisted by an American Buddhist monk, Gordon Baltimore.

In December 2009, a last group of about 4,500 Hmong who were living in Petchabun province were forced back to Laos, as was a small group in the Thai Immigration detention center in Nong Khai, all of whom had been given refugee status by UNHCR and promised resettlement abroad. There remain a large, but unknown, number of Lao Highlanders living in Thailand; plus about 500,000 Hmong are living in Laos.

After resettlement in the U.S., Hmong Americans maintained contact with family and friends and proved to be very flexible in moving away from adverse resettlement areas in search of better opportunity. One such story is the quest of Kue Chaw (U.S. call sign "Bison"), who went from Philadelphia across the country and back to find a new home in North Carolina for himself and many in his group.

Today Hmong Americans are succeeding in the whole spectrum of professions across the U.S., enriching our country, as are Hmong in other nations. Hmong Americans visit Laos in large numbers and are building bridges to the Hmong communities of Laos, where their families originated.

Lionel Rosenblatt is retired in Washington, DC and works to try to assist the Mlabri hill people, "People of the Yellow Leaf," of northern Thailand, many of whose forebears followed the Hmong refugees out to Nan province in 1976. NOTE: Wikipedia—[The Mlabri or Mrabri are an ethnic group of Thailand and Laos, and have been called "the most interesting and least understood people in Southeast Asia." Only about 400 or fewer Mlabris remain in the world today, with some estimates as low as 100.]

Mac Thompson retired in Thailand and visited northeastern Laos two to four times a year, helping out with rehabilitation of upcountry schools, largely in Xieng Khouang Province (see the MEM Master Index for numerous articles). Mac died at his home in Bangkok in 2019. John Tucker is retired in Ohio and remains active in assisting former refugees



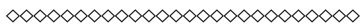
Readers Respond to Burton NKP Article

Mike Burton's fascinating article on Page 3 of the March, *Mekong Express Mail*, "Keeping the Lid on the Secret War..." elicited some reader comments. We share them here.

To the MEM

Please give Mike Burton my congratulations for a most interesting article in this issue (March) of the *MEM*. So little has been written and told of our Secret War in Laos and Cambodia. And, Mike is so right when he writes, "the sacrifices made by Americans involved in that war were no less noble than those who fought elsewhere."

Paul Hauser



To the MEM Editor

Kudos for Mike Burton's article about the Secret War in the March 2023 issue. Got it today, and couldn't put it down until I finished it. I was in Thailand with the US Army Signal Corps, 55th Sig Co., stationed at RTAFB in Udorn, and for a while, a little TRC-24 relay station called "Mekong Relay" (about 2/3rds the way to Nong Kai from Udorn), with most of my year spent in Korat at Camp Friendship.

My wife was an elementary school teacher in Merced, California, a small town in central California, adjacent to even smaller Atwater. Atwater was home of Castle Air Force Base, a Strategic Air Command (SAC) base at the time (since closed), used primarily for training in B-52s and KC-135 air tankers.

In February of 1967, on a particular Monday morning, my wife's fourth grade class was rather glum and unhappy. Upon questioning her kids, many of whom were dependents of Air Force personnel stationed at Castle, she learned that during the weekend, the B-52s and KC-135s, and all their crews, "left for a place called Sattahip, Thailand." They didn't know when their Daddy's would be home.

Due to my position with the 55th, we knew the big bombers had arrived. I didn't know they came from my hometown of Merced. We had been told that this was a huge secret, and not to breathe a word of it in letters home, or anyone else. So I smiled a bit at the obvious breach of security at a 4th grade class in Merced, CA. (A couple of months before, my wife had sent me the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle with headlines prominently displaying "[President] Johnson says no US troops in Thailand.")

My First Sergeant and CO thought it ironic also, and mildly humorous, and passed the info up the line, but I heard nothing more about it. Several years ago I wrote up a brief history of my stay in Thailand which was published in the *MEM*, so this story might be remembered by long-time readers. So keep up the good work. I look forward to my *MEM* every quarter.

Bill Jirsa; Georgetown, TX



Subject: comments on Mike Burton's NKP article

I was a Raven at Lima Site-20A from late March 1969 to December 1969. Our records were kept at Det 1 56 SOW on the Air America ramp at Udorn RTAFB. In theory we belonged to the 56th SOW. In reality we did not. We lived with, flew for,

and were supported with current intelligence by CIA.

While Burton was at NKP before my time in Laos, little changed in that time gap. His writing depicts an all too common assumption by those at his location and elsewhere that they knew what was going on and why. Hardly a reality.

His comments about Ambassador Sullivan regarding LS-85 are far from reality. CIA warned USAF that the NVA were advancing on LS-85 and that they needed to abandon the place. By the way, LS-85 was on top of a 1200-1500 foot finger-like karst formation. Once the NVA surrounded the base the AAA fire would make an evacuation difficult to impossible. The USAF ignored that. The Embassy and/or the Ambassador had nothing to do with halting an evacuation.

The 56th SOW had nothing to do with supplying the Hmong (then called Meo). It was a CIA operation and they did the logistics. Aircraft fuel did come from Udorn via the USAF.

The bulk of the CBU dropped was CBU-24 and about 5% of the bomblets failed to explode, but could and/or would later if disturbed.

Why, one does wonder, would the CIA take USAF personnel records – and how? No Ravens records were taken and we knew far more than Burton – to say the least. I am being kind! No records were "swept up" by CIA. Utter nonsense. By the way, I spent half my AF career in intelligence and I did write a book about my Raven time – *Meeting Steve Canyon, and flying with the CIA in Laos*.

This article is an example of some of the delusional thinking that encouraged FACs in Vietnam, and at NKP, to volunteer for the "secret" Raven program.

Burton, BTW, might want to consider that the NVA, et al, recruited a few Officers and NCO club barmaids to gather gossip.

Karl Polifka; Raven 45

Quilt Donated for "Rosie's Raffle"

Thanks again to Mark and Becky Schlieder for this Assistance quilt. Front by Linda Kashner, Catawissa, PA and eagle stitching on back by Rhonda Freezer, Hughsville, PA. Becky (left) and Rhonda (right) show front of queen-size quilt.



Student Assistance Program Sunsets

Here are our final two scholarship students. Sawinee Manaono, left, entered the program in 2015, and graduated from Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University at the end of February this year. Our last student, Matchima Khanda, entered the program in 2013 and graduated from Ubon Ratchathani University at the end of March. Congratulations to both. This marks the “sunset” of the Student Assistance Program, as planned by the TLCB Assistance Committee after the program founder, Dr. John Middlewood, died. We are particularly grateful to Khun Satawat Sri-in for carrying on John’s administrative work for this program. We expect to publish an article about the entire project in a future issue.



More Projects in Northwest Thailand

In our last issue we featured an Assistance project in Northwest Thailand, for Ban Nam Phiang Din School, providing a bathroom for this rural school. After the issue was published, they found the water tanks were inadequate and new tanks were provided at a cost of only \$321. Subsequent to that project that members Monty and Potjane Dubs sponsored in Thailand, they got a follow-on project approved and completed.

The village has no electricity, so they use solar panels to charge batteries, and the old batteries had deteriorated to the point that they no longer held a charge. The Assistance Committee approved expenditure of over \$6000 for a new set of batteries. These photos were sent from the village to document the receipt and installation of the new batteries, since Monty and Potjane have returned to their home in Pennsylvania. On their next trip they will be able to see the purchase and investigate other needs in this remote area..



Light water tanks, left, and very heavy batteries, at right. Photos forwarded by Monty Dubs.



Official Notice

TLC Brotherhood, Inc. Board of Directors

The 2023 Election will be held in St. Paul, MN on Saturday, September 16th at 0900 hours in the Hotel Radisson Downtown. Eligible members may vote in person OR by absentee ballot OR by proxy, using the enclosed form.

The Board of Directors has selected the following slate of candidates. Write-in votes are also permitted.

For Vice President: Ray Boas
For Secretary: Tom Ungleich (incumbent)
For Board Member (vote for three)
Al Dozal (incumbent)
Roger Durant (incumbent)
Ken Schmidt

Biographies and Board Positions:

RayBoas, Vice President

I have been a member of the TLCB for many years, and a supporter of its objectives for those many years. I have been a TLCB Board member for over three years now. Since joining, I have attended all the reunions except one. Marie and I planned and hosted the 2017 Reunion in Dayton, Ohio and I assisted in the 2018 NKP reunion in Dayton.

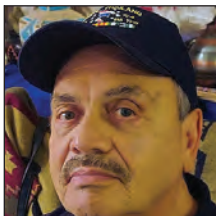


I was in the Air Force for 4 years, went to tech school at Amarillo AFB, studied to be an "inventory management specialist," (fancy name for supply), and then was off to NKP, Thailand. I returned to Wright Patterson AFB where I finished my enlistment as an E-5. After my military service, I went back to work for Bridgestone/Firestone where I retired after 37 years. With my wife Marie still working, retirement was a little boring, so I reentered the work force and worked another 11 years for a local Bank, in charge of outside purchasing and courier duties.

Marie and I have been married for 53 years. I am also a Life-time member of VFW Post 7262, and I feel very strongly about and 100% support the TLCB Assistance work and the Brotherhood goals, and if elected I will endeavor to represent all the members to the best of my ability.

Alfonso (Al) Dozal Jr., Board Member

I have been a member of this honorable group for over 10 years, and my wife, Leonor (Ellie), who is also a member, and I have attended and enjoyed several reunions.



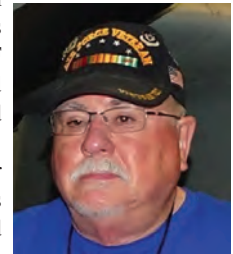
After attending a semester at The University of Texas El Paso, I joined the USAF, and completed basic training at Lackland AFB. My orders then sent me to Chanute AFB, where in December of '71, I graduated as an airframe structural specialist and plastics fabricator. Subsequently, my assignments in 1972 included Dyess AFB with the 463rd TAC Field Maintenance Squadron and Cannon AFB with the 27th FMS. In 1973, my PCS was to Ubon RTAFB where I served in

PACAF with the 8th TFW/16th SOS "Spectre." Upon my completion of duty in SEA in 1974, I was assigned to McClellan AFB with the 2951st Combat Logistics Support Squadron.

In 1975, I was honorably discharged, after which I became a corrections officer before returning to the university. I earned a degree in education and was an elementary school teacher for 30 years before retiring in 2011. Despite the fact that many of us see each other just once a year at our awesome reunions, Ellie and I feel that we have gained a family of brothers and sisters from across the globe. As members of the TLCB, we are proud of the achievements of this great organization, and I would be honored to serve again as a member at large on the board if I receive your vote.

Roger D Durant Board Member

I was in the United States Air Force from July '66 to March '70. I attended weapons school in Colorado and served at Loring AF Base, Maine. As to Southeast Asia, I served at NKP from '68 to '69, Da Nang in '70, and Phu Cat in '69 and '70.



As to my career, I was a computer operator for the American National Bank as a real estate loan officer. Schools I attended are Colorado Graduate School of Banking, National Compliance School, University Nebraska Bank School, and the University Oklahoma. One of my projects was to clean up problem banks. I purchased the Bank of Osborn, changed its name to Horizon State Bank, moved the main Branch to Cameron, Missouri, and ran the bank for over 20 years.

Some of the boards I have served on are the Missouri Bankers Association, Horizon State Bank, ATF Violent Crimes Task Force, Cameron Veterans Home Assistances League, and served as Chairman of the Graduate School of Banking at Colorado. I also served on the Methodist Church Board of Trustees in Cameron and on the Missouri State Police Advisory Board.

I have been a TLCB member since January 2000, and have made two trips to Thailand and one to Laos to see the kids and the help we have provided for them! The adults appreciate what we do for their children, and the kids are happy to see our members show up at their schools! I would like to stay on the Board to continue to help raise money for them!

We have great group of members and going to the reunions is a great way to see old and new friends. The auction, a highlight of the reunion, is one of our best money makers, and as long as John Sweet and Les Thompson let me help with that fun project, I will!

I would like to serve on the board again, so please give me your vote.

Kenneth Schmidt Board Member

I was born in 1950 in Bolling Field, Washington D.C. and moved to Ohio, graduating from Pickerington High School.



I Joined the U.S. Air Force 1969, and after Tech School I was assigned to Missile Security at Malmstrom AFB. My orders in July 1970 - 1971 were to Kimpo AFB, Korea as Law Enforcement Security. In August 1971, I was assigned to Ko Koa Air Station, Lampang, Thailand until September 1972 as AFSC: 81250 Law Enforcement Specialist.

I moved to California in January 1973 and worked for 4 computer

Board Election continues on page 14

Board Election *continued from page 13*

manufacturers and spent 30+ years in Silicon Valley as a Systems Engineer. I retired in 2009 and currently reside in Three Rivers, CA with my wife of 50 years, Pannipa. My TLC Brotherhood membership began in 2008, and I was the chairman and member of the Nominating Committee in 2014 and 2022.

Tom Ungleich *Secretary*

Hello: I am running for the position of Secretary, and would like to take a couple minutes of your time to tell you about myself. I was raised in Syracuse, New York and received a Bachelor of Science degree from the State University of New York in 1968. At the “encouragement” of the draft board, I enlisted in the active U.S. Air Force in 1969 and was assigned to the medical service career field. I served overseas in the Azores, Guam, and Nakhon Phanom. While at NKP, I was assigned as a Radiology Technician and also functioned as the Supply NCO for the MedCAP Program. I was honorably discharged in 1973, but after a while, began to miss military life, so I enlisted in the Air Force Reserve and assigned to the air transportation career field. Receiving a direct commission in 1980, I was subsequently assigned to bases in the US, Germany, and Japan as a Reservist. In September 2001, I volunteered for recall to active duty in support of the War Against Terrorism, deployed to US Forces Japan (USFJ), Yokota AB, as a Logistics Readiness Staff Officer, where I remained until October 2002. I received the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal and the Joint Service Achievement Medal for this year of active duty. After release from recall, I returned to regular Reserve status until my mandatory retirement from the Air Force Reserve in April 2006. I was awarded the DoD Meritorious Service Medal for my 33 years’ military service.



After my active-duty military service, I returned to Florida to continue my education, and obtained a Master of Arts degree in European History from the University of Miami in 1974. I then started law school part-time in the evenings and eventually earned a Juris Doctor degree from the University of Miami School of Law.

I had an eleven-year career with the former Seaboard Coast Line Railroad (now CSX), mostly working out of Miami, FL, in various administrative and managerial capacities. I began practicing law as an associate at a law firm on Miami Beach, FL, in 1986, but after a couple years in private practice, decided to enter the federal civil service with the Department of Defense and its military forces. My legal assignments were numerous due to the constant reorganizations after the end of the Cold War, which included these OCONUS commands: US Army Europe, Hanau, Germany; USFK, Osan Air Base, S. Korea; and PACAF, Hickam AFB, HI. I picked my last assignment to be HQ US Army Japan, Camp Zama, Japan, employed as the Administrative & International Law Attorney until my retirement from the Federal Civil Service in 2010, after a total of over 22 years.

I have been married to Kim for over 40 years. We met at NKP and have one grown daughter, who also lives in South Florida. Despite all the traveling for DoD, we have maintained our home in Hollywood, Florida, since 1984 and try to make a trip to Thailand every 2 or 3 years. We were privileged to meet with both John Middlewood and Mac Thompson on some of those occasions. We volunteered at an orphanage in Buriram, Thailand and wrote an article for the December 2016 *Mekong Express Mail*.

I have been a member of The Florida State Bar for almost 40 years, and have been an active member of the TLCB since 2011. I am a life member of both the Reserve Officers Association and the Veterans of Foreign Wars and an active member of American Legion Post 821 in Clayton, NY. I have participated in several church-sponsored medical missions to the Dominican Republic, and regularly volunteer at Joe DiMaggio Children’s Hospital in Hollywood.

In conclusion, I feel that my education, training, and experience render me well-qualified for the position as TLCB Secretary. If elected, I promise to give my best efforts to the position and to the Brotherhood. Thank you for your anticipated support.



Newest Members in the TLC Brotherhood

The eleven members listed below joined between the March 2023 issue of the *Medong Express Mail* and this printing. You can find more information on our website database.

The *MEM* wishes you all a sincere “Welcome Home.” We are delighted that you have joined us.

No.	Branch	First Name	Last Name	City	State
02021	USAF	James	Harpley	Matthews	NC
02022	USA	Richard	Perry	Blaine	MN
02023	USAF	Barry	Chandler	Rincon	GA
02024	USAF	Gregory	Dotson	Sun City West	AZ
02025	USA	Dan	Allen	Battle Creek	MI
02026	USAF	Darrell	Perkins	Kingsport	TN
02027	USAF	Richard	Thurlow	Tampa	FL
02028	USAF	Alan	Marshall	Motley	MN
02029	USAF	Gerald	Kaminski	Biloxi	MS
02030	USA	Raymond	Millaway	Tampa	FL
02031	USAF	John	Lindeman	Green Valley	AZ

Reunion 2023: St. Paul, Minnesota!

September 14-16 by Bill Tilton

The TLCB was attracted to the Twin Cities because they have the largest U.S. concentration of Hmong people (over 75,000 in 2020). What's more, their community leaders are eager to welcome us there, and are planning a joint memorial service at the official Hmong monument and the Vietnam memorial, which are together on the Capitol grounds



The Reunion Logo features the Hmong symbol for an elephant footprint.

at a spot that is virtually just across the boulevard from our hotel. We are also working on plans for the Special Guerilla Unit Veterans & Families (SGUVF) and other Hmong groups to have special presentations this year. It promises to be an enchanting, fascinating, and very colorful reunion that will be very different from our usual activities. For some background, see the article on pages 9 and 10 about how the Hmong came to the USA and to the Twin Cities with the help of members Mac Thompson and Lionel Rosenblatt.

About the Hmong

Besides being the route of most of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Laos also had a civil war going on, from 1959 until the collapse in 1975. We call it "The Secret War," and we who supported it (whether we knew it or not) are the Secret Warriors. The most successful resistance to a Communist takeover of Laos was by the Special Guerilla Unit, or SGU, led by the historically successful General Vang Pao. The SGU was recruited by the CIA from among the most anti-Communist citizens of Laos, the Hmong hill tribes. After the war anyone who worked with the Americans was in grave danger of being murdered by the victors. Many thousands died, but many were able to abandon their ancient way of life in the mountains and escape from the oppressive new regime.

Immigrants leave their homes for something they believe will be better, whereas refugees like the Hmong have no choice. Life in the jungled mountains was poor but very free. The Hmong refugees were forced to leave, and they were not welcome in other areas similar to their home environs. Nevertheless, they made the best of a really bad situation, overcame the cultural obstacles, which were enormous, and now proudly contribute a delightful aspect to our country's amazing array of peoples and cultures. The Hmong refugees of St. Paul are credited with reviving the declining city, with their industriousness and fresh flair for life and freedom.

Hmong In St. Paul

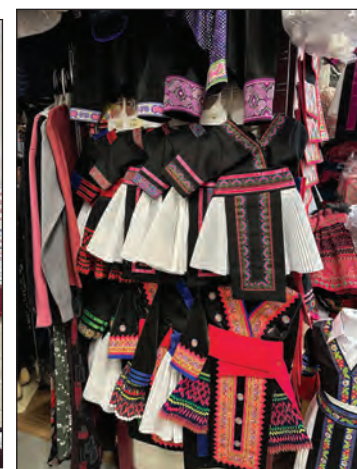
On East University Avenue, two blocks from our hotel, we will see how the refugees and their children took advantage of cheap, vacant real estate to transform downtown St. Paul with their embrace of American opportunity. There are miles of new businesses, mostly Asian, including many ethnic restaurants of all types. Yes, it needs enhancement, but the energy and ability are there. In addition, vacant warehouses have been converted into thriving markets, now in two locations, with an atmosphere of something you might find in Bangkok or Udorn. A tentative plan is to visit one of these as a group.

Watch our website, WWW.TLC-Brotherhood.com, and the June issue of *Mekong Express Mail* for reunion program details, as we plan for this unusual event.

Great Location

St. Paul is the state capital of Minnesota, and our hotel is the only one that's located near the capitol grounds, in the heart of the city. Special attractions are very close to us, including

Reunion continues on page 16



A special feature unique to St Paul are the two Asian Markets. Above left is the popular food court, where vendors offer Hmong and even Chinese and Thai delicacies. Homong apparel, above right, and vast amounts of fresh vegetables abound in these SEA-style markets.



Reunion *continued from page 15*

several excellent museums, downtown shopping, a historic frontier fort, the renowned “Mall of America,” and much more. Built around the only waterfall on the Mississippi River, Minneapolis used that source of power to lead the wheat flour industry for most of our history.

Hotel Information

Make those Hotel Radisson St Paul Downtown reservations SOON, to ensure that you obtain our special group rate. The hotel has agreed to extend our \$119+tax room rate up to three days before and three after the Reunion dates of September 14, 15,16. You can call the hotel at **(651) 227-8711** for reservations, but it is easier and simpler to go to our Website, WWW.TLC-Brotherhood.com, click on “Reunions” at the top of the Home Page, and then click on the link provided on the Reunions Page. If you call, be sure to identify yourself as part of the TLC Brotherhood Group.

Occupancy at he Radisson Downtown depends mainly on the government schedule since they are so close to the Capitol. We cannot predict how their capacity will be affected at the time of our reunion. Unfortunately, parking here is \$25 per day (high, but not bad for the area).

Twin Cities Attractions

Cathedral: As prominently visible from the hotel as the Capitol, and just as spectacular, this is a beautiful and very accessible attraction, as well as being an operating church. It is a short walk (less than ½ mile) across the main Interstate trunk from the hotel. The James J Hill mansion is just across the street from the cathedral parking lot, and should not be missed.

James J Hill mansion: Located on Summit Avenue on a bluff of the Mississippi that contains over 40 mansions, this was the family home of the founder of the Great Northern Railway, a family business for many years. Intricately hand-carved oak paneling and lavish decorations are beautiful and well worth a visit. They have guided tours, but visitors can explore on their own. Admission for this and the Mill City Museum is \$12 or \$10 for seniors and military veterans.

Fort Snelling: Says the proprietor: “After more than two years of rehabilitation and improvements, the Minnesota Historical Society is excited to welcome back visitors to Historic Fort Snelling.

A short walk from our hotel: Capitol with Hmong “bronze bamboo shoot” monument, in the foreground, and behind that to the right, the rear of the Minnesota Vietnam Memorial. Below from left, Minnesota History Museum, intricately hand-carved main staircase of the James Hill Mansion, vast interior of St Paul Cathedral.



“Explore the new Plank Museum & Visitor Center inside a rehabilitated 1904 cavalry barracks and experience expanded outdoor learning opportunities with stunning river overlooks, paved pathways, native plantings, enhanced interpretive spaces, and places to reflect.”

Starting around 1820 the US Government established a presence in the frontier area at this strategic spot, and many historic events occurred here over the years since, including Indian Wars involvement and even slavery within the fort.

Mill City Museum, in downtown Minneapolis: Also about 15 minutes from the hotel, this is a unique and worthwhile attraction. It is a museum built in the ruins of the once largest and most advanced flour mill in the World, and is associated with brand names such as Bisquick, Gold Medal Flour, and General Mills. Flour dust in the mill at this site exploded in 1878, and there were several major fires over the years until operation stopped here in 1965. After another fire in 1991, city leaders and benefactors decided to preserve the building by creating some luxury apartments and opening a very interesting and entertaining factory museum for the flour industry. Opened in 2003, there are exhibits about wheat, flour, baked goods, and actual working machinery from the old mill, as seen from bleachers on an operating industrial elevator that carries visitors to a series of exhibits showing how the mill worked. There is a 9th floor scenic overlook of the river, the city, and St. Joseph Falls, and a movie about the history of Minneapolis. If that isn’t enough, visitors can step into the “Baking Lab” and enjoy a fresh-baked brownie, right there in the mill.

Other major attractions are the **Mall of America and St Paul’s 7th Avenue restaurants.** The mall contains the most retail space in the United States, and even contains a huge amusement park. It’s about 20 minutes from the hotel and about 5 minutes from the Airport and is near Fort Snelling.

NOTE: some wives may agree to visit Fort Snelling if they can also go to the mall!

