

From the presentation by David Lyman, Past President of AMCHAM, at AMCHAM's Monthly Membership Luncheon on April 26, 2006 at the Westin Grande Sukhumvit Hotel in Bangkok

Yesteryear – Bangkok 1956

What Life Was Like When AMCHAM Thailand Was Born

50 YEARS AGO...

It has been said that Bangkok in 1956 was an overgrown village. Not so. Greater Bangkok, then still the Venice of the East, was a bustling metropolis of 1,000,000 people, more or less. But for many Western and Asian expatriates, it was an enchantress, as it had been for decades before and as it is even until this day. For those of us here then, my family having moved to Thailand 7 years before in early 1949, Bangkok and its people and attractions were magnets enticing and holding us in their tropical and alluring sway. As you will learn, never fully being what it seemed or appeared to be, Bangkok was delightful, exotic, seductive, mysterious, pleasure loving, traditional, quite Asian, “Old Siam” as my father would say, yet beginning to change to emulate the cities of the Western expats, particularly the growing number of Americans who were migrating to Thailand.

These personal remembrances which I recount here just scratch the surface of expatriate life in those days long ago. And if they aren't exactly correct, well, as someone once said, “never let the facts stand in the way of a good story”. And besides, I am probably free of immediate challenge from those of you who were not born yet in 1956. And that's the way histories are written.

HISTORY

To more fully appreciate Thailand of 50 years ago, very briefly I will set the scene leading up to the day AMCHAM Thailand was created.

At the start of World War II, Thailand was a relaxing outpost surrounded by the Asian colonies of the European empires. This buffer zone, so to speak, had a foreign civilian population numbering in the thousands. Bankers, missionaries, traders, engineers, miners, foresters, mariners, civil servants, judges, hoteliers, entertainers, government advisors, diplomats they had been a carefree lot convinced of their safety by the protecting combined British, Dutch, French and American military prowess in the Pacific. Extending the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere by the Japanese military beyond China and Manchuria was unthinkable – so was the arrogance and ignorance of the Westerners present here and by their home



Pictured from left: Her Royal Highness the Princess Mother and Freda Ring Lyman in the 1950s.

governments as well. That illusion was shattered in December 1941 by the brilliantly conceived and executed lightning successes of the Japanese land, air and sea forces which in a matter of days subjugated all of Southeast Asia from Hong Kong to the Indian border, south almost to the shores of Australia, and east as far as Guam.

As abruptly as it started, the Japanese mastery of the Orient came to an end. In mid-August 1945, the Japanese military occupation of Bangkok ceased they surrendering to the American OSS operatives who surfaced in country on the news of the surrender. A few days later 30,000 troops of the British and Indian Army under General William Slim and Lord Louis Mountbatten moved in from Burma by air and overland assuming command, freeing the thousands of Allied and native POWs and civilian internees, rounding up and returning the 100,000+ Japanese garrison military personnel to Japan. They stayed for less than a year and then withdrew to deal with the growing militant independence movements in their own Asian colonies. Thailand was free and permissive again. Its sovereignty as an independent nation was preserved



Freda and Albert Lyman at the Law Offices of Tilleke & Gibbins.

intact. Americans began moving in to fill the vacuum left by the Europeans, especially the prevailing dominance of the British who gradually lost much of their influence over Siam in the post War years.

Note – the large Japanese commercial and investment presence in Siam remained after the War at levels exceeding pre War times and growing quietly out of the limelight but unerringly to the present day. Thailand was and is the darling of Japan, as it is of America and Europe and the Middle East.

It wasn't long before the strategic geographic position of Thailand was appreciated internationally. Thailand became a member of the United Nations in late 1946 and in 1950 the UN made Bangkok its regional headquarters. In the late 1940s and early 1950s the British had their hands full unsuccessfully attempting to quell independence and communist uprisings in India, Burma, Malaya and the Straits Settlements. The Dutch were losing their 400 years hold on Indonesia; the Americans were granting independence to the Philippines and the French were fighting desperate but losing battles throughout Indochina to remain colonial masters there. And the vast and mighty China was being overrun by Chinese Communist armies under Chairman Mao Tse Tung. Thailand was indeed the eye of the typhoon of unrest swirling around it but some anti-Americanism and leftist political cadres tried to take root.

An American owned company named "Sea Supply Company" was established – an open secret was that it was supplying arms and training to the Border Patrol Police as a constabulary to keep the spread of Communism in check. The Korean War took some 4,000 Thai soldiers to fight alongside the UN allied forces there from 1950 -1953. America was committed to keeping Thailand Communist free and democratic. Well, sort of democratic anyway, a facade at best, and also as a bastion of capitalism. The latter was not difficult to achieve.

The initial group of Americans to take up residence in Thailand after World War II were the men of the American OSS (Office of Strategic Services – forerunner of the CIA) who had nurtured and helped the Seri Thai underground resistance movement to counter the Japanese occupation. Men

like Johnny Wester, Jim Thompson of the Thai Silk Company, Alexander MacDonald, co-founder of the *Bangkok Post*, Darrell Berrigan, editor of the *Bangkok World*, Howard, and later his brother Billy, Palmer (both born in Thailand) were among the OSS officers I knew who stayed on and entered the business world in Thailand after the war.

Then, as I remember them, came the American diplomats, such as Ambassador Edwin Stanton and his wife, Josie, war correspondents and medical people, educator missionaries and some U.N. types, followed by adventurers and entrepreneurs in love with Asia and looking for new opportunities to earn their fame and fortunes. Jorges Orgibet, founder of the FCCT in 1956 (Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand) was among the former while the latter included my father, Albert Lyman and intrepid ladies such as Rita Meyer, who married Dr. Ammundesen, the glamorous Maxime North, indefatigable Rosemary Whitcraft and of course my dynamic, tireless, organized and talented mother, Freda Ring Lyman. Each had their own story for landing in what they found to be, for them, Paradise. Many other Americans soon were to follow them to Siam. Some of these men were covert spooks, but that is another story.

Bangkok was beguiling, charming, soft, sophisticated, relatively orderly but always accommodating, adapting to the demands and needs of a modernizing Siamese public and American influences. From the mid-1950s rapid changes took place throughout the nation. Free enterprise in commerce was the order of the day and a free wheeling social scene was swinging. The pleasure loving, gracious and hospitable Siamese made it easy then for Americans to thrive here. It was their way of saying Thank You to the United States for supporting the anti-Japanese resistance and for prevailing over the British desire to convert Thailand into a post War British colony convincing the UK to accept war reparations instead. The Thais have never forgotten that the United States took no war reparations – for the U.S. view was that no state of war ever existed between America and Thailand.

One final observation before we leave the scene setting. Vis-à-vis the American private sector presence in Thailand, the U.S. Embassy in 1956, with its 200+ American staff, was pre-disposed to focus almost exclusively on intelligence gathering, political, military and macro-economic aid projects. That reflected U.S. foreign policy of the day. This left scant time for attention to the American business community and civilian citizens. Then, almost anywhere in Asia, if you, as an American, were in trouble you sought help first from the British Embassy. The Brits' local contacts were broader, deeper and better than anyone else's. But if there was really big trouble, then the U.S. Marines were called out. At least that was the line the State Department used to placate critics.

LIFESTYLE

Remember that these were the days before air conditioning had become commonplace in Bangkok. There were three seasons – cool, rainy and hot – otherwise designated as "hot, very ▶▶

hot and damn it's hot"! Sitting at your desk sweat would roll down your arms, back and chest. Everyone had ceiling fans and sometimes heavy rotating floor fans. Aside from a hospital or two, perhaps some diplomatic offices and some movie theaters, the first air conditioned eatery was the Chez Eve Restaurant, owned by a couple of the Sea Supply men. Decent steaks - but only buffalo meat – no corn feed American beef was to be seen for many years until during the Vietnam War when it “fell off the back of the truck” (along with booze and cigarettes) on the way to the American military commissary. And no peanut butter and no ice cream - You made your own at home. Well, until Lou Cykman's 'Dairy Bell' ice cream appeared on the scene, there was one place, Chom Suey Hong on New Road, between the Chez Eve just off the foot of Suriwongse Road and my father's law office above the Bank of America, where you could buy ice cream treats. At night time it converted into a rancorous night club, with beautiful partners for dancing, of course.

You shopped for foodstuffs at the Silom Store or the Tong Who Store, both on Silom Road. Lots of canned goods but forget frozen foods, fresh cheeses, fresh dairy products which were difficult to find in Thailand. Fresh fruits, veggies and



Traffic in Chinatown in 1954, Source: "Bangkok - The Story of a City" by Alec Waugh.

meats were bought daily at the local fresh food markets. Fresh eggs were available principally at Robinson's Piano Store on Suriwongse Road – as piano sales were infrequent, the owners' sideline was raising chickens. Foods not put in the refrigerator, yes we had them then, were kept in screened cabinets on stilts with each leg in a bowl of water. This served as a moat to prevent ants from climbing up the legs and eating everything. Cockroaches swam or flew across. Pump action flit guns kept the insects at bay – some people as well!

Few taxis to speak of were available so one got around by your own car or bicycle, bell clanging trolley/trams, or on the

smoke belching buses – there were 27 independent bus companies in the city with overlapping but not interconnecting routes – or Vespa motor scooters or samlors, the bicycle type, not the motorized ones, and tuk-tuks were not yet invented. Bangkok's traffic has always been the subject of complaints and consternation. Then as now. The city was just somewhat smaller in those days.

To get away from the “hustle and bustle” of Bangkok, one went “upcountry” to Bang Saen, Siracha, Hua Hin or Chiang Mai. Average driving time to each in 1956 was three hours, three hours, five to six hours and perhaps a week, respectively. The trains north and south were faster. Your car needed new shock absorbers after each trip. Pattaya was just emerging as a seaside resort and Phuket was a Malacca Straits tin mining town.

Thailand was not really a tourist destination yet. In 1956 the city claimed only about 800 or so hotel rooms of so called “international standard”. Having seen some of the facilities, I venture that that number was a generous over estimate. Overseas travel by plane meant an hour or so drive alongside rice fields and klongs on a two lane tree lined road to Don Muang Airport, 11 miles away, which had just recently been upgraded to have concrete runways and aprons and a proper two story airport terminal building. By propeller planes a flight from Bangkok to the U.S. West Coast could take three days with intermediate stopovers in Manila or Hong Kong, Guam or Wake Island, Honolulu and then San Francisco or Los Angeles. To Europe – two days with overnights in Athens or Rome. Some commercial planes would not or could not fly at night.

The world of the farangs of the day in Bangkok revolved around activities loosely bounded by New Road from Sathorn to Siphya Roads, north to Petchburi Road, east to Rajadami (New Petchburi Road did not exist then) down to Ploenchit, east again on Sukhumvit to about Soi Asoke which was the end of civilization and the beginning of the boon docks all the way to the Cambodian border, south down Wireless Road east again on Rama IV Road, into the Port in Klong Toey. Most of these roads were tree lined with enormous rain trees and were bordered by klongs, most of which were navigable and connected to the Chao Phya River – The Siamese Mother of Waters. These had been the avenues of commerce in the old days. Eventually all were covered over or filled in to expand the surface roads to handle the increase of vehicular traffic. The sois leading off of them were often not paved, just compacted dirt, and in the rainy season very muddy. Then West down Rama IV and New Roads to Chinatown, down Yawarat Road, Sampeng Alley, Nakorn Kasem (the Thieves Market where you bought back what was stolen by the kamoys the night before) to the Ratanakosin Island/Rajadamnern Avenue area with the government offices, the courts, two universities and the Grand Palace, the Temple on the Golden Mount and the Dusit Zoo. And of course on Rajadamnern Avenue with the Rattanakosin (the “Rat”) and Majestic Hotels and the infamous Cathay Night Club.

Farangs were still wearing white linen or sharkskin, actually quite a smooth textured fabric, and drill cotton suits in ►►

those days. In the absence of air conditioning, they were much cooler than colored clothes. The ladies wore cotton dresses, except for evenings out when gowns and Thai silk were more the order of the day. Jeans were not socially acceptable. Thai women, then as now, were always elegantly attired, coiffed and bejeweled.

We put up with certain difficulties which were more inconveniences than deprivations. Potable water pumping stations and electricity generating plants were bombed by the Allies during the war. Thus running water from the tap for more than a couple of hours a day was a luxury. All drinking water had to be boiled. Since the water pressure was always low, water pumps were necessary to get water to the second floor of your house and above. So when the water flowed you filled up bathtubs, ings, water tanks, buckets and whatever containers were available not knowing when the water would flow again.

Electricity supply was inconsistent with frequent brown-outs and blackouts rotating through various parts of the city. Every house and office had “step-up” transformers to boost the voltage of whatever inconsistent electricity trickled in. Sometimes it would go off at untimely moments.

The telephone system was archaic even for that era. Old black bakelite rotary phones, heavy as could be, little was automated. Phone lines, with only five digit numbers, took many months to get and often were out of service. One of the reasons for the appalling situation was no competition for the government monopoly - TOT. Overseas calls could only be done from booths at the General Post Office on New Road or the then new Erawan Hotel, which opened in 1956; both required advanced booking of several hours to several days.

Don't forget that this is the Land of Mai Pen Ra, a concept, we used to say, which is similar to the Spanish Manana, but without conveying the same sense of urgency.

So businesses used cable addresses for international radio-telegrams inbound from overseas and outbound. Ours was LYMAN, BANGKOK. Foreign Airmail took four to 12 days to get to addresses in Europe and the U.S.; sea mail (surface mail) took one to three months. Domestic mail and telegraph were quite efficient.

Public health was always an issue. The U.S. sponsored a major malaria eradication campaign throughout the nation which was a significant, though not a total, success. Our homes became screened, when we could find screening, to keep out mosquitoes, flies, wasps, bees and other airborne creatures. And in absence thereof, we slept under mosquito nets. A bottle of “Sketolene”, made by the British Dispensary, was a life saver – you splashed it all over yourself to keep the mosquitoes at bay, for about six hours. A side effect was that it took the varnish off of any furniture it touched.



An evening out with friends in Bangkok. Source: “Celebrating 100 Years RBSC”

SOCIAL LIFE

The Americans who gravitated here were an eclectic, fun loving group which was small enough so everyone pretty much knew each other but large enough to be able to avoid those who you wanted to avoid. With the offices of some companies, including AMCHAM, being in the area bounded by Si-phya to Sathorn Roads and New Road to Patpong Road, the latter was very tame in those days, the guys formed the “Patpong Posse” complete with sheriff’s badges, handcuffs and photo IDs– which came in handy to get out of trouble when stopped by the “good ole boy” local cops in the American South and West with their dark glasses with mirror finishes. What the Posse members failed to mention to their “brethren” was that the Patpong Posse was an eating, drinking and carousing bunch with their headquarters at the Red Door and Mizu’s Kitchen restaurants, on Patpong Road of course. Any semblance between Patpong Posse and law enforcement was purely coincidental.

American spouses, upon the call of Mrs. John E. Puerifoy, wife of the then American Ambassador, decided in May 1955 to form the American Women’s Auxiliary of the American Association of Thailand. A year later, just as AMCHAM was being formed, The American Women’s Club was officially chartered at a ceremony officiated by the wife of Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram. Its first meetings were held at my family’s home, my mother being its recording secretary and soon after, its president.

The trans-national corporations of the day considered Bangkok to be a hardship post with entitlements to extra allowances – no resident dared to disillusion them. Social life for Americans, Europeans and cultivated foreign educated Thais centered pretty much on the Royal Bangkok Sports Club with its horse racing, swimming pool, tennis, squash and badmin- ▶▶

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ton courts, field sports, golf, card, reading and billiard rooms (for men only) and parties, parties, parties, often in costume. For many years it had been the only place in the city where you could take a hot shower! The British and Commonwealth citizens and subjects also enjoyed the British Club, still functioning at its original site between Suriwongse and Silom Roads, home for the St. George, St. Andrews, St. David and St. Patrick Societies. The Bangkok Riding and Polo Club catered to the equestrian set but horseback riding for pleasure faded as other forms of entertainment and sports vied for the time of its members. The Royal Turf Club was devoted solely to horse racing and rearing. The shipping industry supported the quaint Mariners Club adjacent to the entrance to the Port of Bangkok, now gone.

The Thai elite loved grand balls with live orchestras (of varying composition and quality), most often held outdoors at the Suan Amphorn Gardens off the Royal Plaza and at the Sports Club. Foreigners were often in attendance sometimes in droves. Everyone dressed for the occasion, thanks to Bangkok's many dressmakers, tailors and shoemakers. There were no social barriers between the Thais and the farangs. It was all a bit exaggerated but that was an age of excess in absence of other entertainment diversions. These functions were always well attended and lasted into the wee hours of the early morning. They were laughing, happy affairs where scotch, gin, vodka, Mekong and beer flowed freely and was consumed in copious quantities. A couple of hours of sleep and off to the office by 8:30 in the morning.

Thai, British, French, Dutch, Japanese and Chinese banks and the Bank of America operated efficiently so funds were available for lending, if supported by land, personal guarantees and compradors. The Baht, or Tical as it was formerly called, exchange rate for the U.S. Dollar was rock steady for many years at 20:1. "A Tical is a nickel" was a favorite saying.

The farang community comprising many different nationalities and backgrounds was homogenous, cosmopolitan and growing rapidly. In the absence of today's 5-star hotels and the multiplicity of restaurants, most entertaining occurred in homes. Homes were houses, no apartments had been built yet. Houses had decent sized gardens for teas and garden parties. A house could be rented for U.S.\$100 – 250 per month. Home furnishings were mostly rattan and wicker couches and chairs with cotton covered loose cushions. Dining tables and chairs were usually solid teak wood. Dinner parties at home were common and often elaborate affairs on good chinaware and crystal ware – very occasionally black tie with white dinner jackets or "Red Sea Rig" – black tie, tux shirt, cummerbund but absent the jacket – in deference to the heat of the evening. It was all very civilized. The food was still prepared on charcoal fire stoves in the outside kitchen– no gas or electric stoves then.

Naturally this took a small army of servants to cope and accommodate – a cook and/or No. 1, a food server, wash amah, coolie, gardener(s), gate guard (who mostly slept), and a driver for those with cars. Combined they cost perhaps U.S.\$200-250 per month plus a 100 kilo bag of rice for everyone. "Do you really need so many servants?" a young cousin of my family ►►



... parties, parties, parties, often in costume. Photo Source: "Celebrating 100 Years RBSC"

50TH YEAR ANNIVERSARY

visiting from the U.S. asked rather incredulously? To which my father, chewing on his ever present cigar, replied, tongue in cheek but with a straight face after counting on his fingers the number of domestic staff in his household, “Well, how can anyone get along with any fewer?”

Benny Goodman and his big band toured Asia, courtesy of the State Department cultural programs, and in late 1956 played for two weeks in Lumpini Park at the U.S. exhibit at the Constitution Fair in Bangkok. The highlight was playing for and with H.M. the King, a very accomplished musician in his own right even then.

Opium dens were still legal in 1956 and in some households, more often than not Chinese, smoking opium pipes after dinner was the equivalent of the British custom of after dinner cigars and port/brandy. To my father, the Opium dens, being quiet, dark and sedate places, were tourist attractions for visitors to see, as was Thai boxing in one of the two stadiums of the day, and horse racing at the Sports Club on weekends.

Down in the area just outside the Port of Bangkok at Klong Toey and catering to the merchant seamen and crews of an occasional visiting man-o-war, were the Mosquito Bar and the Venus Room. Introduced to me by my father, they were home to the roughest toughest set of Thai hostesses as I have ever encountered. If there were not at least two brawls a night, involving the patrons too, it was considered a dull evening. Uptown, in addition to the likes of The Cathay Cabaret, Hoi Tien Lao and Chom Suey Hong, were the Silver Palm (owned by Jorges Orgibet along with Alexander McDonald and Willis H. Bird), Moulin Rouge, Sani Chateau, Salathai Club, Starlight Club, Café de Paris, International Club and the Lido cabarets as well as the venerable Bamboo Bar of the Oriental Hotel for prowling by the more sophisticated salubrious types, or as our British friends would say, “the upper classes”. Whatever, Bangkok’s nightlife was wide open, affordable and accommodating to all tastes and pocketbooks. I should add, that massage parlours, bath houses and short time/curtain hotels were unknown in 1956 – they awaited the Vietnam War years. However, despite public protestations to the contrary, for several centuries in the provinces as well as in the Green Light areas of the capital, brothels and tea houses abound and there was no lack of cabarets and dance halls and girls to go with them.

It wasn’t all play time; business and commerce were conducted, albeit at a much slower pace compared to today. Thailand continued its traditional exports of natural resources, minerals, seafood and agriculture commodities to earn foreign exchange to buy consumer goods and needed construction materials and machinery to help in its reconstruction and business expansion. The BOI (Board of Investment) was yet to come into existence until 1959 to promote a home grown import substitution manufacturing industrial base.

AMCHAM THAILAND

The American founders of AMCHAM were involved in trading companies, insurance, import and distribution of petroleum, pharmaceutical and medical products, aviation, business ma-

chines and office products, sewing machines, soft drinks, developing the silk and cotton industries for export, exporting of handicrafts such as bronzeware, neiloware, silver, jewelry and gems, lawyering, and doing construction work around the country – the old American Embassy on Wireless Road, now being used as the American Consulate, was the first purpose built office building in town and was designed and constructed by an American – Dave Workman (his nephew arrived in Bangkok last year).

There were other Americans whose names are too dim to recall or of whom I have read about but do not remember. Most of these men and women, among the 60 or so American civilian businesspersons the early 1950s in Siam, were instrumental in the establishment in 1956 of the American Chamber of Commerce in Thailand (AMCHAM) and its forerunner from 1950, the American Association of Thailand. Actually, in late 1955 preliminary steps were taken to create The United States Club of Thailand. That effort quickly faded and, based on the idea of my father in September 1955, was replaced in by an initiative to create an American Chamber of Commerce in Thailand following the template used by the Dutch who formed the Netherlands Chamber of Commerce some months earlier. That idea took root and, supported by the U.S. Embassy, in early 1956 an organizing committee was formed with Reeve Hankins as Chairman, AMCHAM was created drafting its constitution as an adaptation of the constitutions of the Manila and Tokyo American Chambers. I can not find the records but I believe that my father was its Secretary, and for sure, was its legal counsel.



Author David Lyman as an U.S. NROTC Midshipman in 1956.

So that’s the way I remember how life was in Bangkok in and around 1956. Others will tell the AMCHAM story and the tales of its founders and those who followed them. There is far more of this story to relate of the parallel developments of both the Kingdom of Thailand and AMCHAM Thailand. But that is for another time. Each of Thailand and AMCHAM grew at accelerated paces never stopping to this day. A few hiccups were encountered along the way, but none ever upset or diverted the special relationship of friendship and spirit of cooperation between the U.S. and Thailand which we knew and from which we have all mutually benefited. Thank Goodness. ■