

AMCHAM'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY

YESTERYEAR - BANGKOK IN 1956

WHAT WAS IT LIKE WHEN AMCHAM THAILAND WAS FOUNDED?

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It is 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 now. 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, 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 here.

Few of us are still around today who remember those early days, and we are becoming fewer. I can readily think of only – Mike Gerson, Mark Whitcraft, Arlette Cykman, Kurt Mueller and Khun Ankana, consultant and long the Front Office Manager of the Oriental Hotel. There must be others who's names escape me and who have probably retired quietly but are still breathing. My recollections, I hope, will be accurate reflections and interesting to all persons who are fond of Thailand and its early post WWII history. And if they aren't exactly correct, well, who's going to contradict me? Most of you in this audience were probably not yet born in 1956.

To more fully appreciate Thailand of 50 years ago, we first have to set the scene leading up to the day AmCham Thailand was created.

At the start of WWII in December 1941, 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 governments as well. That illusion was shattered in the winter of 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 to Australia, and east to Midway.

Some 1,500 British, Australian, New Zealanders, Canadians, Dutch and American civilians (men, women and children) were interned by the Japanese occupying army in Bangkok alone. More foreigners were here but remained relatively free to move about during the war years as they came from Axis and occupied and neutral countries – Germans, Austrians, Italians, French, Czechs, Danes, Belgians, Swedes, Swiss. Other Asians, Indonesians, Indian, Chinese (except for captured military) were courted by the Japanese for their “Asia for the Orientals” scheme. The Japanese occupation army just took over the homes, clubs and offices, servants and staff of those interned.

As abruptly as it started, 3½ years later the Japanese mastery of the Orient came to an end. In August 1945, the Japanese military occupation of Bangkok ceased with 30,000 troops of the British and Indian Army under General Slim moving in from Burma by air and overland assuming command, freeing the thousands of Allied POWs and civilian internees, rounding up and returning the 100,000+ Japanese military personnel to Japan. They stayed for less than a year and then withdrew to deal with the growing militant independence movements in their Asian colonies. Thailand was free and permissive again. Its sovereignty as a free and independent nation was preserved 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.

The initial group of Americans to take up residence in Thailand after the War was 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, Alexander MacDonald, 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 Stanton and his wife, Josie, and war correspondents and the medical (Dr. Marshall P. Welles [Bangkok Christian Hospital] Dr. and Mrs.[Nurse] Waddell [Bangkok Adventist Hospital]) and educator missionaries (like Walter Zimmerman and Floyd Wilson of YMCA/YWCA), some UN types such as Bill Cummings of FAO, followed by adventurers and entrepreneurs in love with Asia and looking for new opportunities to earn their fame and fortunes. Jorge Orgibet, founder of the FCCT, was among the former while the latter included my father, Albert Lyman, Lou Cykman, Willis H. Bird, Herman Seiler, Reeve Hankins, Lou Mulkern, Jim Moore, Tim Chew, Jim Shaddy,

George Griffin, Jim Robinson, Jack Fee, David Workman and intrepid ladies such as Rita Meyer (nee Ammundesen), Maxime North, 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. Most of these men, among the 60 or so American civilian businessmen 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. Some of these men were covert spooks, but that is another story.

Bangkok was once again beguiling, charming, soft, sophisticated, relatively orderly but always accommodating, adapting to the demands and needs of a modernizing Siamese public and American influences. Free enterprise in commerce was the order of the day and a free wheeling social scene was harmonious. 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 British colony convincing the UK to accept war reparations instead. The Thais have never forgotten that the United States took none – for the US view was that no state of war ever existed between America and Thailand.

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 year 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. 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” 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 -53. America was committed to keeping Thailand communist free and democratic. Well, sort of democratic anyway, a facade at best, but a bastion of capitalism. The latter was not difficult to achieve.

The French in Indochina fell to the Communist Viet Minh in 1954. That same year, the Manila Pact, a mutual defense treaty sponsored by Thailand and the U.S. to counter the further spread of communism, was signed creating SEATO, the South East Asia Treaty Organization, with Thailand as its lynch pin and headquarters. For a variety of reasons the Thai political scene was dominated by the Thai military and their rivals the Thai Police, and subordinated to that was the influence of the Thai military in business circles.

American policy, military and economic aid at the time supported a stable and strong anti-communist Thailand while overlooking shameless improprieties.

By 1956 Thailand was well along the path to post war social and economic development but politically was beset with sometimes violent in-fighting among the military/political elite. Thailand was coup d'état prone to say the least, and political corruption and vote rigging were rampant as well as unofficial official participation in illegal businesses. Beneath the smiles there was little local tolerance for political dissent – political prisoners, killings and disappearances were not uncommon. But such discord never spilled over into the foreign community. The Thais were too gracious and well mannered for that to have occurred. Actually Bangkok was, and still is, one of the safest cities in the world for foreign residents.

While the Cold War was hot in 1956 with the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the British, French and Israelis seized the Suez Canal, young Asian nations were licking their wounds and learning to live with independence from colonial masters. But Thailand was at peace, between coups, and using the lull to prepare, through the upgrading of its ports and construction of many new highways and bridges and rail links to open up the provinces, dams, reservoirs, irrigation canals and rural electrification, for the anticipated conflicts to eventually come across its borders.

One final observation before we skip over more of the politics. Vis-à-vis the American private sector presence in Thailand, the U.S. Embassy, with its 200+ American staff, was pre-occupied to focus almost exclusively on intelligence gathering, political, military and macro-economic aid matters. This left scant time for attention to American business and civilian citizens. There was a Commercial Counselor who tried his best, but he was often out ranked by other priorities. “Economic diplomacy” supporting the role of the vast, growing and widely distributed American business population was a concept to be coined by APCAC (the Asia Pacific Council of American Chambers of Commerce) a decade later. Then if you as an American were in trouble, almost anywhere in Asia, 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.

The Americans here were a fun loving group 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 headquarters of some companies being on Patpong Road, it was very tame in those days, including AmCham’s office, 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 their dark glasses with mirror finishes in the American South and West. 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 them and law enforcement was purely coincidental.

It wasn't all playtime, business and commerce was done, 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) came into existence in 1959 to promote a home import substitution manufacturing base. Americans were involved in trading companies, insurance, import and distribution of petroleum products, aviation, business machines and office products, sewing machines, soft drinks, developing the silk and cotton industries for export, lawyering, and doing construction work around the country – the old American Embassy on Wireless Road (still being used) was the first purpose built office building in town and was designed and constructed by an American – Dave Workman (his nephew is in Bangkok now).

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 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. They were 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 to Chinatown, down Yawarat Road, Sampeng Alley, Nakorn Kasem (the Thieves market where you bought back what was stolen by the kamoey's the night before) to the Ratanakosin Island/Rajadamnern Avenue area with the government offices, the courts, two universities and the Grand Palace. And of course on Rajadamnern Avenue with the Rattanakosin and Majestic Hotels and the infamous Cathay Night Club.

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, field sports, golf, card, reading and billiard rooms (men only) and parties, parties, parties, often in costume. It was 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 raising and rearing. The shipping industry supported The Mariners Club adjacent to the entrance to the Port of Bangkok, now gone.

Remember that these were the days before air conditioning had become commonplace in Bangkok. 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 only air conditioned place 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 seen yet for many years. And no peanut butter and no ice cream - You made your own at home. Well, there was one place, Chom Suey Hong on New Road, between the Chez Eve one New Road just off the foot of Suriwongse Road and my father's law office above the Bank of America. 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; they were non-existent in Thailand. Fresh fruits, veggies and meats were bought daily at the local fresh food markets. Fresh eggs were available principally at Robinson's Piano Store – as piano sales were infrequent, the owners' sideline was raising chickens.

Banks 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, to US Dollar exchange rate was rock steady for many years at 20:1. "A Tical is a nickel" was a favorite quote.

The farang community comprising many different nationalities and backgrounds was homogenous, cosmopolitan and growing rapidly. In the absence of the 5-star hotels and the multiplicity of restaurants of today, 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 US\$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 – 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. 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 US\$200-250 per month plus a 100 kilo bag of rice for everyone.

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 foreigners were often in attendance. And they always dressed for the occasion, thanks to Bangkok's many dressmakers, tailors and shoemakers. These functions were always well attended and lasted into the wee hours of the early morning. They were laughing, happy affairs where the booze flowed freely. There was no social barrier between the Thais and the farangs A couple of hours of sleep and off to the office by 8:30 AM..

No taxis to speak of were available so one got around by 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 smaller in those days.

Motor cars were not too common, as all had to be imported, but they were available for purchase. We owned a number of used cars in succession, a Peugeot 402, several Citroens 11 BL, a Desoto, a Dodge, and finally a Cadillac and a Humber. The biggest car in town, outside of the Royal stables, was the American Ambassador's Checker – like the New York taxicabs of the day, big, heavy and strong.

To get away from the “hustle and bustle” of Bangkok, one went to Bang Saen, Hua Hin or Chiang Mai. Average driving time to each in 1956 was 3 hours, 5-6 hours and perhaps a week, respectively. Your car needed new shock absorbers after each trip. Pattaya was just emerging as a seaside resort.

Thailand was not really a tourist destination yet. The city claimed only about 800 or so hotel rooms of so called “international standard”. Overseas travel by plane meant an hour or so drive across rice fields and over klongs on a 2 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. DC 2s, 3s, 4s and 6s were being flown as well as the tri-tailed Constellations (Connies). Boeing 707s and Convair jets were still 3 years away from being flown commercially transpacific by PanAm. By propeller planes a flight from Bangkok to US West Coast could take 3 days with intermediate stops in Manila or Hong Kong, Guam or Wake Island, Honolulu and then San Francisco or Los Angeles. To Europe – 2 days with overnights in Athens or Rome. Some commercial planes would not or could not fly at night.

That summer I returned from university having completed my Sophomore year and was a 19 year old NROTC Midshipman 3rd Classman. To get back to Bangkok I bummed rides on US Navy FLOG Wing air transports via Hawaii and the Philippines. A 4th of July reception was held at the US Ambassador's house and grounds for all Americans in town and foreign dignitaries, including the Russians with whom we were fully engaged in the Cold War. (This is the way I looked that evening) After the party I joined a couple of other guys and went dancing with hostesses at the nightclub atop the Hoi Ten Lao restaurant, 9 stories up in Chinatown – then the highest skyscraper in town. The white dress uniform with brass buttons was quite an attraction to the lovely Thai ladies of the evening ... and vice versa. A memorable night it was.

I mentioned the Russians as the only place to mingle with them was at such diplomatic events or at the Royal Bangkok Sports Club, their only outlet to the social whirl of Bangkok. There we played volleyball with them, we all being in our bathing suits – and they were very serious about the sport, as they were about almost every thing else. They rarely lost. They had to report all of their contacts with Americans to their superiors and so did those of the US official community, including me as a visiting Midshipman.

Farangs often wore white linen or sharkskin (actually quite smooth textured) 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 was more the order of the day. Jeans were not socially acceptable. Thai women, then as now, were always elegant attired, coiffed and bejeweled.

Benny Goodman and his big band toured Asia, courtesy of the State Department cultural programs, and in late 1956 played for 2 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.

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. They were home to the toughest set of Thai hostesses I have ever encountered. If there were not at least two brawls a night, it was considered a dull evening. Uptown, in addition to the likes of The Cathay Club, Hoi Tien Lao and Chom Suey Hong, were the Silver Palm, Moulin Rouge, Sani Chateau, Salathai Club, International Club and the Lido cabarets as well as the venerable Bamboo Bar of the Oriental Hotel for prowling by the more sophisticated types, or as our British friends would say, “the upper classes”. Whatever, Bangkok nightlife was wide open, affordable and accommodating to all tastes and pocketbooks. I should add, that massage parlours and bath houses and short time/curtain hotels were unknown in 1956 – they awaited the Vietnam War years. But, brothels and tea houses abound and there was no lack of dance halls.

Don’t forget that this is the Land of *Mai Pen Ra*, a concept which is similar to the Spanish *Manana* but without connoting the same sense of urgency.

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. So when the water flowed you filled up bathtubs, water tanks, buckets and whatever containers were available not knowing when the water would flow again. All drinking water had to be boiled.

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. In the summer of 1955 I was incapacitated by appendicitis and was taken to the Bangkok Adventist Hospital for an operation. Just as I was being wheeled to the operating theater, the lights went out, as usual. So, instead of using an elevator, I walked down 2 flights of stairs into the operating room and climbed up onto

the operating table. An emergency generator in the hospital supplied lighting for the surgeons to do their bit. However, the anesthetist couldn't see too well for the spinal he was giving me and I ended up with 25+ years of periodically debilitating headaches.

The telephone system was archaic even for that era. Old black bakelite phones, heavy as could be, nothing automated. Phone lines, with only 5 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. About 28,000 subscribers and for every 10 phone lines there were 11-12 paying users, not party lines. This meant that someone's phone was always out of order, unless you paid the repairman a stipend to keep you on line. To make an overseas call, that 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. Teletype was still very new and not really available commercially. Faxes were about 20 years off in the future. So businesses used cable addresses for international radio-telegrams inbound from overseas. Ours was LYMAN BANGKOK. Since charges for out going messages were by the letter or word, messages were short and cryptic, sometimes using commercial codes which provided combinations a few letters to equal whole phrases or template sentences. Foreign Airmail took 4 - 12 days to get to addresses in Europe and the US; sea mail (surface mail) took 3 months on the average. Domestic mail and telegraph was quite efficient.

Public health was always an issue. The US sponsored a major malaria eradication campaign throughout the nation which was a significant, though not 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 glass 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 6 hours. A side effect was that it took the varnish off the furniture it came in contact with.

We all sported sore arms having had our annual or semi-annual injections against cholera, scrub typhus, typhoid and paratyphoid, tetanus, Japanese B and every 3 years against smallpox. Such shots were available at the Snake Farm of the Thai Red Cross on Rama IV Road. Hospitals for foreigners were the Bangkok Nursing Home, Bangkok Adventist Hospital and Bangkok Christian Hospital, plus Siriraj and Chulalongkorn Hospitals and at the Immigration Division of the Police Department.

Oh yes, Thailand is home to many very poisonous snakes. Cobras, kraits and vipers, of varying degrees of lethality, were often found in gardens so one had to be careful where you walked and you always carried a flashlight walking anywhere at night. Fortunately, anti-venom was readily available at hospitals and clinics, if you could identify the snake which bit you. Sureeeeeeeeeee.

The *Bangkok Post* and the *Bangkok World* were the English language newspapers of the day. Both were good papers with wide international as well as local coverage. At one time my mother was the Society Editor of the *Bangkok World*. To get around the censors,

