

## 2005 BURMA (MYANMAR) DIARY

-- How I found my teenage years and more after 40 years --

By

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Editor's Note:

The author's late father, Myron Olson, worked with my own late father, Chelk Ping Lee, then the country's Director of Technical Education under the Ministry of Education, in establishing Myanmar's (then known as Burma) first-ever technical and vocational education system. Reading David's account of his re-visit to the country, his first in 40 years, brings back much fond remembrances of my own. Convinced that there are others who will enjoy David's interesting account of his personal journey, laid out in his inimitable prose, I have talked him into letting me post it on the Web so as to share it more widely.

Thank you, David.

Win Aung  
Potomac, MD  
September 6, 2006

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How to begin? Actually this adventure began back in 1956. I was 14 years old my brother Jerry was 16 and my sister Ginny was 10. My dad took a sabbatical from his teaching job at Dunwoody, a technical school in Minneapolis, to help set up a technical school in Rangoon, Burma through a grant from the Ford Foundation.

Our entire family moved to Rangoon and lived there for a little more than two years. That whole experience is another story altogether. We came back to the U.S. in midsummer of 1958

Skipping ahead 40 years, I'm married, have two children and am living in San Jose California. I work for United Airlines as an A.M.T. (aircraft maintenance technician. i.e. mechanic)

In early 1998 I got a phone call from Lauri Flach, one of the teenagers we were with in Rangoon. She, her sister Edie, Betsy Lindeman-Flint and another Rangoon brat (as we called ourselves), Diane –then Rydell now Hatheway, were trying to get a reunion

together and were calling those she had telephone numbers/and addresses for with hopes of reaching as many as possible.

A long story staying long; Lauri, Edie, Betsy and Diane organized our first Rangoon reunion held at Algonquin Park near Washington D.C. It was such an overwhelming success that we began a series of reunions about one year apart with more people coming to each new one:

- Oct. 1998 Algonquin Wash. D.C.
- Oct. 2001 Boulder Creek California
- Oct. 2002 back to Algonquin
- Oct. 2003 Myrtle Beach S. Carolina

At the 2003 reunion at Myrtle Beach arranged by Sally Anne and husband Harold, a special guest, Jai Kwong arrived from Hong Kong. It seems like each reunion someone special shows up. I say, "special" because it's their first reunion and we haven't seen them since 1958. Anyway, Jai suggested that we return to Rangoon for our next reunion. I'm sure others had the same reaction that I did at the time, that it was a pipe dream. It just didn't seem possible. Too far away, too much planning, too expensive.

I played with maybe going and with not going for most of the next year. I ended up going for multiple reasons:

- I'm turning 63 in Oct. of 2004 and if I don't go now, I know I never will.
- Going with a group of old friends is a definite advantage over going alone.
- Looking back, my life in Burma was so very important to me that I knew that if I didn't go, I'd be kicking myself forever.
- I had, and still have, dreams about my time in Burma; all good dreams, all good times.
- Finally, I loved that experience so much that I know. I had to relive it one more time.

Upon reflecting, it was somewhat selfish on my part because although they would have wanted to go, Jerry and Ginny couldn't go. The folks needed their care and Ginny was recovering from foot surgery and having difficulty walking. So I became the representative of the Olson clan. So what follows is a day by day account of our trip that began Feb. 1<sup>st</sup> until my return on Feb. 14<sup>th</sup>.

Feb. 1<sup>st</sup>

I was very nervous about going. Although I fly often, this was my first full fare flight and also my first "e- ticket" at that. It turned out to be a "piece of cake". All I needed was to hand the agent my passport and I was booked from San Francisco to Narita to Bangkok with assigned seats. I'd never really traveled like that before as usually I fly standby. It was nice not having to wait for my name to be called on the standby list. As it turned out, if I had gone standby I could have flown 1<sup>st</sup> class to Narita, but I never would have made a flight for the rest of the trip.

Feb. 2<sup>nd</sup>

It was about a seven hour flight to Japan, with a two hour layover and six hours to Bangkok. Arrived at 11:30 PM on Feb 2<sup>nd</sup> since I passed over the International Date Line.

I met Carolyn Bacon-Coughlin when she arrived and we shared a taxi to our respective hotels. Carolyn went to the Peninsula hotel where Oliver, Susan and Lauri were staying and I to the Sheraton Orchid Hotel where Edie, Bill, Diane and Allen were staying. I got to bed about 1:30AM-tired but wired.

Feb. 3<sup>rd</sup>

Next morning, those of us at my hotel had breakfast together and then I got talked into going to a massage parlor with them. Quite an experience! All 5 of us in one room getting worked over by what appeared to be teenage Thai girls. I've been suffering from a damaged rotator cuff and this was not a good time to "feel the pain." That was my first and last massage- ever.

Had a Thai lunch and shared two taxis to the airport where we met Jai and flew on to Yangon. Arrived at about 7:30 pm. Jai had a tour guide named Franco who met us and handled our baggage and had cars waiting to escort us to Winwin's house. He also had an entire staff who carried bags, opened doors, tipped others when appropriate, drove us around, arranged meals, washed and pressed clothes, served drinks. My God- this is a great way to live!

So we went to Winwin's house on Than Lwin road. This home is more of a mansion than a house. Winwin had room enough to sleep all 12 of us. We had a grand meal there, some drinks and then to bed. By the way, Joe and Caroline Stepanek were already there, as they had arrived the day before.

Feb. 4<sup>th</sup>

Winwin, by the way, was one of the most delightful, beautiful ladies that I had set eyes on, with the exception of my wife Mary. The next morning was a breakfast buffet with eggs cooked to order. Fruit, breads and juices. It was grand. Then one of the drivers took us all to look for our old homes. First stop was Kirkham's school. I have to say that Rangoon has changed so much that almost every thing is unrecognizable. Yes, it was the Kirkham's school, but it just didn't look right. For one thing, to get to the building we had to walk up a road that approached it from the back side. The building was on a hillside overlooking University Ave., but we always arrived by going directly to the front from University Ave. Also the front entrance wasn't right. Instead of a big door directly in front, we now entered by a side door. Also the place looked smaller than I remembered. Stepping back as far as we could, all of a sudden the mystery was solved. The house had been cut in half.. Workers were in the process of renovating it. There was a fence between the two halves. When we visualized the two buildings connected, yes! It

was the old school.

At this point everyone's memories went into high gear. Stories began to gush and flow. I really had very few memories as I only spent about one week at Kirkham's. I just remember playing badminton there. However, my sister Ginny spent two years there so I took several photos to show her. I also enjoyed being with others whom it was so dear.

Next was the Flach's residence on Inya Lake off of University Ave. We found it with no problem. The people who now lived there were French and were out shopping at the market. Their servants contacted them by phone (cell?) and we had permission to walk about the grounds. Edie says the place was in better shape than when they lived there. So we relived events that being there brought back to us. (I have to say that I think I spent more time at the Flach's, the Arce's and Johnny Seymore's house than my home). Butch showed where he, I, Spike, and Mike Weil found the Japanese machine gun bullets. (That's another long story.)

The Flach house was maybe the best find in Rangoon (Yangon- I have to get used to calling it that.) for us. From there, we continued on to the Kokine Swimming Club. As kids, we probably spent more time here than anywhere else; it was the center of our daytime social life. Again, the roads looked different. Where there were jungle paths and basha huts were now high rises and many more buildings, plus more roads and side streets. Once at the swimming club though, all looked the same. There were some minor changes, like a new pool behind where the old clubhouse was (and still is). The high dive has been removed. The 5 meter board is no longer there and the extended structure where Butch and I used to shimmy up to about 10 meters where we dove off is missing. We met the treasurer of the club and told him how we practically lived there year round and he gave us each a key chain from the club. I was sorry that I didn't get one for Jerry and Ginny.

We then went to a government gem store, which is the only place that you can legally buy gems in Myanmar. I bought two necklaces of jade for Becky for a "song and a dance."

On to Chauk Htat Gyi Reclining Buddah. Next to the Kokine, the old Buddha image that my mother painted was a huge structure in the jungle with only the head and torso still intact. It was centuries old and had trees growing out of cracks in the structure. I believe that the name meant "6 stories big". It no longer exists.

The new Chauk Htat Gyi looks like a golden ceramic reclining Buddah. It's a beautiful structure, but not as big as the original. (Or is that because when you are smaller, as I was then, things seem bigger?). This is said to be the largest Buddha image in Myanmar.

Sometime during this first day we drove by Joe and Mike Weil's compound and saw where they lived, and then we had lunch at a local Burmese restaurant. In the afternoon, we visited the Strand Hotel where Carolyn stayed for about 6 months and then to Bogyoke Market (also called Scotts market). I remember going there when I was a teen

and trying to sell some things that I received from the States, stuff like model airplanes and dope. (That's paint to put on the model airplanes). This time I bought a sandalwood fan for Becky and a Shan bag for me. We then went to the Kandawgyi restaurant on Royal Lake for another glorious meal. Before going back to Winwin's, we went to the Inya lake sailing club, (now called Yangon Sailing Club), where Edie had taken me for a moonlight sail back in 1957. Very romantic; I will never forget it. We could see the American embassy residence across the lake, where we spent many hours with the Kerr's and Braddock families. We could also see the Flach residence at the south end of the lake. Sadly, we learned they no longer have moonlight sailing each month. Winwin joined us there for some appetizers and then we went back to the Kwong home. There we met some of Jai and Winwin's friends. They were important government people and local businessmen, and very interesting to talk with and listen to.

Feb. 5<sup>th</sup>

After another fabulous breakfast at Winwin's, we were off to the Shwedagon. We arrived at the east gate (or entrance). Our guide was now Mr. Nyi, who remained with us for the rest of our stay in Myanmar. His English is excellent, and he is very polite, as are all Myanmar people. He is also very knowledgeable, and is pleasant and likes to laugh a lot. I like that. I told him my memory has it that there is a meadow and a pond at the north entrance of the Shwedagon. I asked him if that was so. Mr. Nyi said (as he said many times during our tours) that my memory was excellent as I continued to recall places, names and Burmese words. I told him that he should talk to the people I work with about my memory as they might disagree.

I think I remember these things because they were so vivid and important to me. As we walked around the base of the Shwedagon, I recalled that the height of the Shwedagon was 326 ft high. Again Mr. Nyi was surprised because that was exactly right. Why do I remember things like that from 47 years ago and can't remember what I had for dinner last night? As we toured the pagoda Mr. Nyi told us the meaning of many symbols such as a particular one that is associated with the day of the week you were born.

I am a rat. In Burmese mythology I think that's a good thing. I knew that Oliver was also a rat and sure enough, he is. Edie, also being born on Thursday is, however, a mouse (in my mind). Lauri, born on a Saturday, is a dragon and Sue, born on Sunday, is a chiruda. (Man upper body and bird lower body). I'm sorry that I didn't get the birthdays of the rest of the group, but I did buy a painting showing these symbols so we can figure out our symbols. Ginny has the painting.

Now here my memory failed me. We were given 45 minutes to go about on our own and I went to the south gate believing it was the major entrance to downtown Rangoon. I descended the many steps (hundreds it seemed) only to find I was wrong. I found out later it was the west entrance I wanted which we visited next where I bought a pair of sandals. I also bought a Teak wood carving for Ginny here in the Shwedagon. I remember an old movie that someone had taken of my Mom and Dad at the west entrance. It stands out because my Dad was a tall man and stood well above the local

people and you could pick him out so easily in the film because of his height and blond hair.

The pair of sandals became important because every time you entered a temple, pagoda or a private home, you were required to remove your foot wear. Sandals are easier to take off than laced tennis shoes and socks. The only time that I wore shoes and socks during the rest of the trip was when I was on an airplane. Another wonderful thing about Jai and Winwin's guide service. Traveling along with Mr. Nyi and the tour group was Mr. Tun. He spoke very little English but his job was to carry bags, open doors, pay tips when appropriate and pay for all meals and hotel expenses. He was also our banker. Whenever we needed Kyats, we'd tell how much we wanted and he would reach into his Shan bag, which was packed with bills and give us what we asked for, usually \$100 worth. He'd then write it down on his journal. At the end of our stay, we would settle up with Winwin in American dollars. The arrangement was terrific for us.

After the Swhedagon, we drove around Royale lake and saw Rangoon Technical High School, where my Dad worked and taught. We didn't get to the back side where the Okalapa flats are situated though I would have liked that as that's where we lived for our last year in Burma. The school was across the street from Aung San Park, which is still there, with a statue of General Aung San –still intact. The man who first led the resistance against British colonial rule which resulted eventually in Burma's independence in 1948, There is also a floating restraunt that looked like a golden ship, called Karaweik Hall.

Feb. 6<sup>th</sup>

We flew from Yangon to Mandalay with a brief stop in Bagan. It was about a one hour bus ride from the airport to the city because we stopped at a silk weaving factory, then visited and walked on U Bein Bridge (the world's longest bridge made entirely of teak wood). I encountered a young girl who did her darndest to sell me a jade necklace. I finally broke down and bought it and we then became fast friends. I can still see her smile!!

Speaking of smiles, all you have to do in Myanmar to get a smile is to give one. Truly, to anyone, anytime, anywhere, I have never been disappointed. The same goes with a wave; they will always wave back if a hand is free. You must be careful though- a typical American wave would be to hold your arm up, hands palm out, and wave your palm up and down. Here, that's not a proper wave; it means "*laba laba*," ("come here"). In Myanmar, a side to side motion is best.

After the teak bridge, we went to a Buddhist Monestary, (pronounced and spelled "Monastery". I guess that's the British influence.) Here more than a thousand monks (I remember them as *Pongvis*), live and study. Nuns and initiates as young as eight live here as well. The old monks wear saffron robes, sometimes purple. The young initiates wore white, and the nuns, a pleasant shade of lavender.

After the monks came in several single file rows to have their noonday meal (and final meal of the day), we were allowed to go inside the compound to visit and observe. Again, we left our shoes and socks outside the compound. Earlier, I had made the statement that I had used foresight by leaving my shoes in the bus and was wearing sandals while the others were stuck with more cumbersome footwear.

Meanwhile, Mr. Nyi and I talked to a monk who knew and was associated with some monks that I had met at a Buddhist temple in Boulder Creek California in 2001. I had a lengthy and interesting conversation with him. When I went back to the street where I had left my sandals, they weren't there! Unheard of. No one steals someone's sandals! But, they weren't where I had left them. I began to doubt my memory and I looked several places before I found them in the middle of the street, quite a ways from where I left them. Then it dawned on me; all I had to do was look at Oliver's innocent face to realize that my smug declaration about the sandals was the source of this prank. Throughout the trip, the two of us continued to pull pranks on each other, though Oliver always had the upper hand. He has a devious mind. What a guy!

I want to say here that I noticed that all the monks seemed to be in really good physical shape; none were fat. Must be the diet and exercise they do during the day.

We had lunch at another restaurant in Mandalay. We then checked into the Sedona Hotel which was across the street from the ancient palace where King Thebaw lived with the royal family until they were deposed by the British in the late 1800's. ("The Glass Palace" by Amitav Ghosh is a great read for anyone who is interested in this part of Myanmar's history.)

The palace is surrounded by a moat that appears to be about one mile long on each of four sides. That evening, we visited the hill above Mandalay to view the city at sunset. There we met a large group of teenagers who were in a private school learning to speak English. They were very anxious to practice on us so we talked for a long time. Earlier we had visited another temple that had been made entirely of teak wood. It had been moved during the war to protect it. It had been built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. So much history! I asked Mr. Nyi if any temples or shrines had been damaged during WWII and was told that the Japanese, being Buddhists, avoided damaging religious structures. Back at the hotel (where earlier Randy and I went for a swim at the hotel pool), Randy, Diane, Allen and I went for a walk in search of "The Green Elephant Restaurant". We never found it, so we came back to the hotel to go to the Uno lounge to receive our "welcome drink".

Randy, Diane and I went to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor lounge in search of a martini before turning in. Diane told me that had been her mother's favourite drink in Burma. Turns out, the bartender had no idea how to make one. We still hadn't had dinner so we also ordered a pizza. At least an hour went by before we finally got the pizza but still no martini. When it finally arrived it turns out to be pure Martini-Rossi vermouth. Oh well, to bed.

Feb. 7<sup>th</sup>

We took a boat trip up the Irawaddy River to Mingun, an ancient, unfinished pagoda. The king who started the construction died before it was finished and construction was stopped. Only the base remains. To begin the boat ride was quite extraordinary, as our boat was surrounded by at least a half dozen other boats. We appeared to be in a log jam. As we watched, the owners and captains of the surrounding boats moved and maneuvered, all working together. It must have been an every day occurrence as although it looked confusing, it didn't take long to untangle. We boarded the boat by going from one vessel to another while walking on wooden planks and using a hand rail that was a wooden shaft held at each end by two seamen. The boat ride was pleasant, and after about forty-five minutes we were met by oxcarts to take us to the temple. I had bought a straw hat to keep the sun from my bald spot. I had been using a St. Louis Cardinals baseball cap that Bill had loaned to me. When we got to the temple, I couldn't find the baseball cap. By the time I found it, the group was going back to the boat so I didn't get to see that temple.

We returned to Mandalay where we visited a tapestry and puppet factory and then went to lunch. We went to a restaurant that we never would have picked on our own; we walked down a dirty and unkempt alley to a back-door-type place. We ordered Burmese curry and it was great! Local knowledge and another great find by the fabulous Mr. Nyi. Our "banker" Mr. Tun was also in charge of a special piece of luggage. It was actually a large chest that turned out to be a wine locker that Oliver and Susan had shipped to accompany our travels. Inside were at least a dozen bottles of exquisite and expensive wines. What a special treat. Upon request, Mr. Tun would produce a few bottles and joy would prevail! We shared these wines at several meals as we did at this one in this obscure restaurant in Mandalay. Thanks so much Oliver and Susan!

We went back to the hotel where Bill and I relaxed at the pool while Randy and Allen went to a book store and the others went shopping. That evening we went to do some more shopping at jade and marble carving shops as well as silk and fabric weavers. We then went to a comedy club called the Moustache Brothers." The show may have been better if we weren't all so tired and anxious to get back to the hotel. However, when the comedian's wife came on stage to dance, it was great. She was a great dancer of Burmese style. She also was accompanied by two ladies who were good. (Not as good as the wife, but good nonetheless). So, the dancers carried the show. It almost went on too long, but we all agreed it was worth seeing.

Feb. 8<sup>th</sup>

Left Mandalay for the airport where we would fly to Heho. We were totally delighted to see Jai and meet Mei, who was already on board. This was the first time I had seen Mei since 1958 and she was then *Mei Mei*, or "little sister," as she was ten years old. What a terrific lady, so beautiful and with a ready smile.

At Heho we took a one hour bus ride to the jetty where we were to take a boat ride across Inle Lake to our hotel. On the way to the jetty, we stopped to take some pictures of fishermen fishing and also some water buffalo on the side of the road. The water buffalo



seemed to be in an argument over something, as they had locked horns. Oliver noticed that as soon as we stopped and got out of the bus, they quit fighting. He said that they must have known we were the boss and decided to behave.

At the jetty, we boarded three five-man boats. They reminded me of long dugouts, probably 15 feet long with a strange outboard motor on the back. They had a kind of an elongated shaft to the prop. You'd have to see a picture to understand. It was about a one hour boat ride to the Khaung Dine hotel, a magnificent place with a gate for an entrance set out on a bay of the lake. It was surrounded by "floating huts" that were the individual rooms on stilts on the bay.

We were assigned rooms at dockside. Lauri and Carolyn were given the "Queen's Suite," Jai and Mei the "Princess Suite," and Randy and I, the "Prince Suite," all on the hillside overlooking the water. The others were in the "floating huts" on the lake. At first I was jealous not to be on the water but then we noticed that the floating huts all had mosquito netting above the beds, while ours on the hillside didn't. As it turned out we didn't see a mosquito while there anyway. Must be the right time of the year.

We then took a boat ride to Indein village and took a long walk up a hillside and through a village and market place where I bought a shirt on the way back. At the end of our climb, we saw a centuries-old complex of shrines and stupas. Must have been an archeologist's dream. Hundreds of old shrines, most in disrepair, pieces of carved stones lying about on the ground everywhere. You'd have to see photos to realize the extent of the place. It was totally unreal- an Indiana Jones scene comes to mind.

Also, the walk between the boat and the temples was through a dense bamboo forest. It was an amazing place. Back in our boats, we saw many fisherman and "leg paddlers" on our way back to the hotel.

Feb. 9<sup>th</sup>

We took a boat ride across to the east side of Inle Lake. First, we went to a pre-school for local children. They must have known we were coming, as they had a program prepared for us. They sang and danced. We gave them prepared gifts of school supplies and some candy. The Flach family sang a song for them in Burmese called *Pojo*, or "old man". Fun was had by all.

From the school we went to a market, kind of like the Milpitas Flea Market. I noticed that Jai and Mei kind of kept a close eye on me or at least helped me make intelligent purchases. They must have thought that I looked like a kid in a candy store. I love them!

At one point I figured out how to become invisible. I squatted down on the ground like a local and just watched. It worked. Mei took a lot of movies and snapshots. I hope I get a chance to see them.

We then returned to the school and had another show put on by the kids as they were practicing for a dance and song competition. We made a financial contribution and left with a grand feeling inside.

We took another half hour boat ride to a floating restaurant where we were welcomed by a group of musicians playing drums and gongs. Again, we were being treated like royalty. We had lunch on the deck overlooking the waterway entrance to the restaurant. Mei and Jai selected our dishes and as usual it was superb. It was time to leave, and my group and I were boarding the boat; the musicians began to play again. Noticing that they didn't play for other boats leaving, Oliver said, "It looks like they are very happy to see you go, Dave!" As we motored out of the bay, I realized that a new boat was arriving, causing the music. Another round for Oliver!

Our next stop was Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda, a pagoda featuring five Buddha heads. The story is that these five heads were being transported to the temple when a big storm blew up and one head was lost overboard. Sometime later (I'm not sure how long) the fifth head showed up along side the others all draped in seaweed. It's believed to be a miracle. This all happened several centuries ago, I think.

We then visited a silk weaving factory and a cigar making factory, all on stilt teakwood shops on the lake. Then we took about a one hour boat ride back to the jetty where we started from two days before and we got back on the bus.

All of these excursions have been planned and carried out by Mr. Nyi. Our group only had to follow instructions. It's so easy to comply.

It's now getting close to evening and Jai changes plans as he wants to show us the city of Taungyi. This is an ancient capitol city where Jai and Mei and family would vacation during the hot summer days as Taungyi is located high in the Shan hills and is cool. The Kwong family has close friendship with Shan royalty so they would spend the sweltering days in cool weather. I'm so glad that we were able to see Taungyi rather than just be told about it, although it was almost dark when we drove through and we didn't see as much as we would have liked.

We soon arrived at our next hotel, the Aye Thar Golf Resort Hotel. Jerry and Kay would have liked it here. It looked like a fine golf course, but we arrived at dark and left early the next morning so didn't see much of the grounds. The patrons are, of course, businessmen and generals so a lot of business and government policy is decided here. Just like in the States. Mr. Nyi mentioned that a round of golf costs about \$10 in Myanmar.

It was now the evening of the ninth of February, which was Chinese New Year. So we celebrated "Kung Hay Fat Choy" at the restaurant. It had been a long day and all were tired and off to our individual bungalows. The last to leave the restaurant were Jai, Mei, Bill, Edie, Randy and myself. The six of us plus a driver rode a golf cart to our rooms,

which looked like a Burmese bus with people hanging on the outside and holding on on top. Someone took a picture, and I hope I get to see it.

Feb. 10<sup>th</sup>

On to Bagan by plane and lunch at Riverside Sunset Garden Restaurant. We had a quick swim at the hotel pool and were on to more temple viewing. Now, this is the most incredible place for ancient temples in all of Myanmar. We were off to visit these magnificent temples.

I need to stop my travelogue here for an observation: Everywhere we stop we are surrounded by merchants. They are usually children, and they are, as their parents must know, harder to resist. As they try to sell their wares, the typical pitch is, "Hello, hello, lucky money, lucky money." (They say this in English of course). As we step off the bus, it seems that most of the vendors make a bee line straight for me and follow me everywhere I go calling their chant followed by, "How much you pay?" Once we arrive at an agreed price, it's, "Good for you and good for me," and everyone is happy. If I went and paid the original price, I'm sure that they would be disappointed. Now, if I don't buy, they follow me up to the bus and as I'm sitting there trying to ignore them, they rap on the window and use sign language to try to make a last sale. Some of the guys and gals in our group say that they can spot a soft touch easily. Edie and Lauri claim it's because I am such a "nice guy". Someone else (I don't recall who - O.F. maybe) says I've got "sucker" written on my forehead. I think it's more because I'm interested in people, make eye contact, and love to stop and chat with them. I like to see them smile.

Then it was off to a sunset at another pagoda overlooking the Irawaddy River. Magnificent! As we were waiting for the sunset (which was so magnificent at each evening, almost like a sunset seen nowhere else; more reddish, more exotic than I can remember ever seeing anywhere else, only Burma!), many children were trying to sell us trinkets. Oliver and Susan handled it really well. I overheard what they were up to.

They said, "Hey guys, can you keep a secret? Yes? O.K. Heres the secret: I'll buy a group of postcards from each of you for 500 kyats each, but you'll have to promise that you won't try to sell us, any of us, any more cards. Now, do we have a deal? They agreed and Oliver and Susan gave them the money. But it wasn't long before they tried again. When they came to me I said, "You promised." I got a look that said that they didn't know I was part of the deal. So I tried another tactic. I showed them my wiggly eye trick and they showed me how to "snap" my fingers and soon we were buddies. I asked them their ages, which was 15 to 17 years old, and asked them to guess mine. The boldest one said, "67?" After a pause, I said, "Close enough". All these children are so handsome and beautiful. It brings joy to the heart. We went to another major temple called the Shwezigon, and I gave a few cheroots to a policeman. He is now my friend and following us on our tour. Oliver notices this and tells me to give him some Kyats when I can do it discretely to cement our relationship. Now we really are buddies and I didn't even get arrested for bribing a policeman. I think that Oliver was hoping for more fireworks than

that.

Feb. 11<sup>th</sup>

This morning is a blur of more temples and more markets. At one temple, I decided to buy a painting and another Shan bag. Then, instead of viewing temples, I decided to play with the kids who were trying to sell stuff. Oliver had given me a handful of rubber bands and soon the children weren't merchants anymore, but children - just like me. I took off my straw hat, set it on a bicycle seat and four boys, one girl and myself had a contest trying to knock the hat off with rubber bands. I lost of course, because they cheated. I had drawn a line in the dirt about 10 feet from the target but they kept shooting from "point blank range" of about one foot. Again, I showed them my wiggly eye trick and we parted as friends.

At lunch we had an exceptional puppet show, went on forever with lots of curtain calls. I think that Carolyn especially liked it as she got a special hug from the performers who found out her fondness for horses which were a major part of the show.

We then went for a pony cart ride to another glorious sunset, back to the Tharabah Gate Hotel in Bagan for dinner where we met another of Jai's friends. This is our final night in Bagan, and our dinner companions were U Saw Weik and his wife Htay Htay. U Saw was at one time the government's leading guide for the archeological finds at Bagan. He is now a private businessman and owns a guide service. He and Htay Htay are perhaps the most knowledgeable people on Bagan history, geology and architecture in the country and it was extremely interesting listening to them. Altogether, it was a very worthwhile evening.

Feb. 12<sup>th</sup>

We returned to Yangon by Air Bagan. I got autographs from two flight attendants who were featured in the airlines magazine. Air Bagan is one of only three private airlines in the country, and it's only a few years old. We noticed that there was a supervisor on board giving O.J.T. to the flight crew. We asked where she was from and she replied, "It's a long story, but Turkey." Diane noticed the logo on the tray tables were Air Mexico.

Back in Yangon, we went to the Dusit Inya Lake Hotel that was built by the Russians back in 1958 or so. It's a first class place, very beautiful, and overlooks the lake.

Bill, Edie, Lauri, Susan and I borrowed a car from Winwin's fleet and went looking for more old homes in Rangoon. Unfortunately, the one my family lived in on Kokine Road (now Kaba Aye Pagoda Road) was gone, replaced by high rises and commercial buildings. But we did find what we think was Chichi and Roberto's home.

The servants of the owners allowed us to take photographs of it and we'll have to check with the Arces to see if it was their home.

We went on to Chin Tsong Avenue and looked for Bill Ramlow's first home, which we didn't find. I remember a story about a tennis court and a Burmese python, which I'll tell later. But we did get some great pictures of the Kambawza palace where we all lived for many months while waiting for a home to move into. We did find Bill's second home, right on University. We then found what we think is Betsy and Bruce Lindeman's house on old Windemere road. I remember many parties there.

We went back to Winwin's for a silver and gem cocktail party. I bought some silver baskets for Mary and the girls bought some ruby and sapphire rings.

Then we saw a *pwe* dance show at poolside, where professional Myanmar dancers performed. As was custom, we each presented envelopes of cash to the dancers of our choice, provided by Jai of course. At Winwin's house this night, Mei gave me a gift: a picture book of photographs by three Myanmar photographers. The book is called "Myanmar Smiles" and Mei said she bought two copies; one for herself and one for me, because she said that I was so sensitive to people of other cultures. Also, I like people who smile. I treasure this book. Mei, I'll love you forever.

Inya Lake too tired for more than a drink when the mosquitoes drove us inside for bedtime.

Feb. 13<sup>th</sup>

We were joined at breakfast by Jai, Winwin and Mei, where we finalized our accounts and boarded the bus for the final trip to the airport at Mingaladon. We waved goodbye and were gone. The last I saw the Kwongs was on the front steps of the Dusit Hotel.

Fortunately for us, Mei was flying to Bangkok with us. I say "fortunate," because the Yangon Airport was a fiasco, jammed with travelers all trying to get through customs at the same time. Mei took charge and got our group all through, in what seemed like an hour or so. She even handled passports and seat assignments for all but Randy who was scheduled to fly out the next day and thought he would try on standby. The last we saw him he was at the gate waiting. Never saw him again. I'll have to write to Diane and find out what happened. I'll have to say that he was a great roommate and a pleasure to travel with. So long, Rangoon!

We landed at Bangkok airport and here our group went different ways. Mei, Edie Lauri, Susan and Oliver were going on to Hong Kong. Bill was headed to L.A. by way of Seoul, Korea (I think), and Joe and Caroline and I are flying on United to Japan where we part. I'm going to San Francisco, and they are going to Denver by way of Seattle. Carolyn is headed to Detroit by way of Seattle on the next morning's flight. She leaves at 6 am, and I at 7 am. I had intended to stay at the airport day room with the Stepaneks, but once I went through immigration to claim my luggage, I couldn't get back to the day room where I was to meet Joe. So, I decided to hang out with Carolyn, as she had a spare bed in her room at the Amorie hotel, just a walk away from the terminal. We strolled around

the hotel and I did some shopping where I bought a chess set for Matt and a carved incense burner for Becky. Had a light dinner and to bed as we needed to get up at about three in the morning for our flights.

Feb. 14<sup>th</sup>

I met Joe and Caroline at the gate and we were only a row and a seat apart on our way to Japan, so that was comforting for me. At Narita, I went into the executive lounge as their guest, so had a comfortable wait for my final flight to San Francisco. Thanks, Joe and Caroline, for your help. I was able to bring back some wonderful Myanmar arts and craft souvenirs which reflect the culture and traditions of the country and its people.

I'm now home in time for Valentine's Day. It's going to take me several days to fight off jet lag. I'm so glad that I went - what an experience!!!

So this last reunion is like a completed circle. Those of us who weren't able to go were not forgotten as we traveled around and shared new experiences. I intend to send this letter to those who might enjoy what we did knowing that we were thinking of you all.

David

P.S.: Lauri brought to my attention some things we noticed in Myanmar. Good things. Pleasant changes. Remember the hoards of *pye* (pie) dogs that roamed the streets? We saw very few of those and those we did see were in pretty good condition. Also, in Rangoon there were very few of those old decrepit buses jammed-packed with people inside and on top. We did see these buses, cars, and trucks outside of Rangoon, however. There were no jeep taxis circling Independence Square and far fewer trishaws (I remember them as "si-cars", or side cars). I also noticed that there were no beggars and sick people on the streets looking for handouts. Also, the city was clean. There weren't many betel nut stains on the ground, and I don't recall any intrusive smells. The Shwedagon was especially clean. We were no longer bothered by walking barefoot on the tiles around the pagoda. One thing hasn't changed though: the friendly attitude of the Burmese people.

Two phrases we used every day:

*Mingalaba* - Hello

*Ce-zu-tin-ba-deh* – Thank You