

enough splash to hopefully scare off future offenders and set some precedents.

The aftermath? It's pending, and although her fingers are crossed for a solid ruling, Dr. White will let the courts handle it over the next several years. In the meantime, she has articles to write and books to publish.

Rita DeAngelo was a work-study artist for the Ban Chiang Project from Fall 2004 to Spring 2008. Her pottery roll-out drawings can be viewed on her web site along with her other artistic endeavors, www.rita.pillowcat.com. A special thank you to all the individual Friends of Ban Chiang who donated to the "Rita Fund" in last year's newsletter! ❖

SNAKE SOUP

by Bill Henderson



I arrived in Luang Prabang the morning of March 1st for the Middle Mekong Archaeology Project (MMAP) season 2008. Bounheuang, our Lao co-director, had arranged for my visa, an impressive, colorful document that took up a full page of my passport. This helped me move quickly through the immigration process. A short truck ride took us to the Kounsavan Guesthouse in downtown Luang Prabang where a comfortable room awaited me for the next two nights.

Six of us, Laos, Thais, and Americans, had dinner that evening at an outdoor restaurant along the banks of the Mekong. A typical Lao dinner of sticky rice, pho (noodle soup with greens and various spices), fried potatoes, cucumbers and mixed vegetables, and of course everyone's

favorite, Beer Lao.

The next day we assembled field equipment which was stored in our new headquarters—an old French bank occupied by the Luang Prabang Culture Section. By Monday the rest of our crew arrived: Helen Lewis from Ireland, and Yanik, our Penn student. We then set out for Ban Phaa Daeng, a village with no electricity and outside of cell phone range.

After a rather bumpy and dusty ride along a dirt road that seemed to become increasingly narrower as it passed through several villages, we arrived at our rustic home on the edge of the village, our abode for the next two weeks. As promised, the local villagers were busy constructing a toilet facility behind our house. Our truck unloaded the last few pieces of hardware needed to finish the job by the illumination of my flashlight.

A ladder led to the sleeping accommodations that consisted of a thin mattress, a sleeping bag and a mosquito net for every two people. Our morning wake-up call came from the local roosters before 5 AM and breakfast was usually prepared on charcoal stoves by about seven.

The excavation site of Tham Vang Ta Leow (TVTL) is located in a cave about



Buy one get one free?

halfway up a mountain, a 45 minute hike and climb from the village, not to mention a wade across the Nam Pa, a small river between the village and the site.

I was lucky enough to have to make the trek to the site only once, where I spent the day sifting excavated dirt searching for artifacts to be bagged. I was familiar with the site, having made the climb during the original survey in March of 2005. At least I proved I could still do it; one more climb was enough; why push my luck?

Most of my time was spent in the village scrubbing the recovered lithics, bones, and snail shells, drying them in the sun, and marking the artifacts with appropriate bag numbers. Usually, there was an au-

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Our house near the excavation site Tham Vang Ta Leow.

dience of local children and villagers very much puzzled by the activities of the visitors washing stones and shells and carefully lining them up on the bamboo racks.

Bathing and laundry were accomplished in the Nam Pa river, although an occasional water bucket bath was also helpful. I could never seem to keep enough clean T-shirts and trousers though; the fine brown dust of the area seemed to instantly coat everything.

One of the most memorable evenings was the night our Lao team made snake soup. One of our Lao colleagues arrived one evening with a quite impressive snake, about seven feet long. He began scaling it, similar to how you would scale a fish, intending to prepare snake soup. When he removed the snake's head, there appeared to be another snake head inside. He began pulling it and withdrew a second snake that had been eaten whole. Snake number two was about five feet long. "Buy one, get one free?" The snakes were cut into sections about four inches long and boiled over our charcoal stove. I did have some broth the next day that was pretty good, but somehow I forgot to ask if it was the product of the soup prepared the day before. Apparently this is a local delicacy because the following day one of the locals passed by proudly carrying home an equally long reptile.

A remarkable experience, to be sure. Would I do it again? Well...

Bill Henderson has been a volunteer for the Ban Chiang Project for over 15 years! This was his second trip to Laos; the first was in 2005 with the original MMAP survey team. Bill has been an irreplaceable asset to the Ban Chiang Project...thank you, Bill, for so many years of hard work and dedication! ❖

Writing History Five Centimeters at a Time

By Yanik Ruiz-Ramón

My epic journey to a remote village in Laos never really began, it was just the seamless continuation of time. Right now I am flying over the Arctic Circle on my way back to the United States. Despite my best efforts I cannot splice the past into comprehensible segments. In fact, time has stopped. My plane simply hovers. It does not advance or retreat, it just floats while the earth rotates underneath me. Eventually, supposedly, it will land, but right now I am in a physical and mental limbo where time is meaningless. In this transcendent (or is it exhausted?) state I cannot find a beginning. Hopefully the end will reveal itself more easily.

When did my voyage start? What was that pivotal moment? Did it start when I raided my bank account and bought the plane ticket? Or possibly the moment I hurled my luggage into the guts of a Chinatown bus and snatched the last seat as it rolled away from the curb... Maybe that moment of complete exhaustion when I stopped writing my midterm essay at four in the morning and realized I was no longer at Penn, but mistakenly on a Thai beach two

hours away from the Bangkok airport. I remember vaguely realizing that it would be prudent to find a way back in time for my connecting flight. A limpid and soggy shirt lay next to me. Soft sand caressed my toes. The sea gently exhaled waves onto the shore.

I suppose there is the classic starting point where I walked across the tarmac in Luang Prabang, Laos, the plane's propellers still whorling behind me, jumped into the back of a pickup truck, and drove almost two hours across a dusty, bumpy, dirt road to a minuscule dot on the map.

It was there I joined Dr. Joyce White's quest for the elusive Middle Holocene Era (a missing link in Southeast Asian prehistory).

I am looking out of my window. Darkness. Why did I go to Laos? No answer. Only the monstrous jet engines devouring the atmosphere, deforesting the sky. It depends on who you ask. Ardeth implored me to ensure that Joyce ate, rested, and didn't fall off the mountain. Basically, to make sure that she didn't work herself into the hospital. A big part of my job was to do a video of the MMAP excavation to complement Bill Henderson's video of the MMAP 2005 survey. The museum



photo by Yanik Ruiz-Ramón

Joyce at the cave site, Tham Vang Ta Leow, Laos.

publicist gently reminded me that photos without Joyce as their subject were worthless. I suspect Joyce also needed another person to haul more equipment 12 time zones across the world for her excavation. And me? Why was I there? I was there to satiate my urge for travel. I was finally setting foot in the Far East.

Forty-six hours of travel from Philadelphia found me in front of a swarm of adorable Laotian children. They stared at me, a tall bearded ghost, and hid behind their mother's skirts. The village's adults watched us silently, patiently. Bony dogs sniffed around our heels as we unloaded

luggage. Hens pecked the yard clean. Cows moved slowly through the back yard, ringing their dull bells to announce our arrival.

I will unabashedly admit that the moment you realize archaeology is not Indiana Jones' quest for the Holy Covenant, it becomes the most mind-numbing and suicide-inducing occupation invented by mankind. This may sound extreme, but let me put it into perspective. Your day consists of hiking up a steep, treacherous mountain to a rock shelter. Dust hangs in the air constantly from all the sifting and coats your body. Instead of digging

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LABnotes

❖Meetings

Ban Chiang, Thai archaeology, and the Middle Mekong Archaeological Project were well represented at the **Society for American Archaeology** (SAA) meetings in Vancouver in March. **Soi Eyre** organized a session on Southeast Asia with 12 papers and participants from as far away as Australia. In addition to Soi's own paper, **Joyce White**, **Katherine Arrell**, and **Ben Marwick** presented "Reflections on Southeast Asian Complexity from Middle Mekong Landscapes and New Archaeological Research in Laos." At another SAA session on early metallurgy, **Joyce** and **Elizabeth Hamilton** had a paper on the source for early bronze in Thailand. **Vince Pigott** was a discussant for that session.

❖In the News

In the flurry of articles that emerged after the **raids on museums** in January (see article "Top Secret" on pg. 2), the New York Times quoted Joyce in at least two articles. If you google "**Ban Chiang smuggling**" you will get several pages of links to media coverage of the raid and its

aftermath. Soi also was interviewed about the case for the Thai television station NBT TV. On another note, **Bill Henderson's** video of the 2005 MMAP survey was broadcast on Lao ITV in March.

❖In Press

Joyce White: "Dating Early Bronze at Ban Chiang, Thailand." *Proceedings for the European Association for Southeast Asian Archaeology*, Bougon, France, September 2006.

Joyce White and Bounheuang Boasisengphaseuth: "Archaeology of the Middle Mekong: Introduction to the Luang Prabang Exploratory Survey." *Recherches nouvelles sur le Laos* (New research on Laos), edited by Yves Goudineau and Michel Lorrillard. Coll. Etudes thématiques, Publication de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient.

Christopher King is publishing *Stable Isotopic Analysis of Carbon and Nitrogen as an Indicator of Paleodietary Change Among Pre-State Metal Age Societies in Northeast Thailand* with Archaeopress, British Archaeological Reports, on his study of Ban Chiang skeleton stable isotopes.



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Is tonight meat night?

a hole like normal people you have to use a garden trowel. Every five centimeters you must painstakingly draw the trench to scale with each stone, bone, and soil feature in place. Then you photograph it and measure the depth of the trench. Repeat. This isn't too bad until you realize your back aches and there are 200 centimeters to go. And all of those amazing artifacts? The first few fragments of bones, stones, and shells are fascinating. A few centimeters later they lose their sparkle.

So what was the salvation of this medieval torture? I was determined to find out. There had to be some redeeming qualities, some path that led these archaeologists to sanity. And then I became engaged in some of the most stimulating, informative, and fascinating discussions of the year. All underneath some forsaken rockshelter overlooking a luscious valley. Against all logic I learned that, yes, the garden trowel does trump the shovel. Only when the depth and location of every artifact is faithfully recorded, only when it is sealed away in one of hundreds of labeled plastic bags, can the massive 3-D puzzle be put together and reveal history's secrets. From this enigma Joyce can work her magic and extrapolate the data into grand and fascinating theories.

Perhaps some of my most hair-

raising moments occurred while descending the mountain. After two weeks of traveling back and forth, the dirt on the path was loose and slid easily underneath our feet. I decided to wear flip-flops and "go native," foregoing the rugged jungle boots I had purchased for this trip.

Climbing up in flip-flops wasn't too bad. My descent could probably be defined as a controlled fall. But there were always two things I could look forward to: crossing the cool, refreshing river and riding back in the truck. We happily bounced down the road to the village, knowing that beer would be awaiting us after a hard day's work and wondering what unusual local delicacy was for dinner that night.

Chickens constantly scouted our yard for shreds of food. They were extremely pesky and unabashed. I felt no guilt when it was meat night. My only regret was that the chickens we consumed were tied up and causing no trouble; the ones that roamed free would have been much more psychologically fulfilling to eat.

I learned that sticky rice is fun to play with and roll around in your hand. I also learned that it is torturous to eat rice three times a day for two weeks straight. The local soups and stir fries we ate were extremely tasty and near the end of the trip I grew a liking for the tiny fried fish served as appetizers. Traveling in Laos was a culinary experience that exposed me to new dishes and forms of cooking.

All of my previous travels have been in Western continents and exposed me to relatively familiar food.

Laos offered a spectacular new panorama. The most rewarding part of this food was its authenticity. Made by Laotians for Laotians. I just happened to be in the vicinity. There was no bastardized American version, only the real deal.

That was the most exciting part of this trip. I did not get the tourist's perspective. I stepped directly off the plane into rural Laos and saw a part of the country that few Westerners get to experience. *Living* in the village, living with the people, allowed me to observe their lives in practically an unvarnished form. It is refreshing to see a way of life so drastically different from your own, so drastically different from even the Laotians who live in the city. It forces you to constantly reflect on how you should live your life and what aspects to adopt from other cultures or reject from your own. Thankfully I had this opportunity to join Joyce on her excavation. It was a *truly* educational experience that I savored with delight.

Yanik Ruiz-Ramon is a Communications major at Penn. He is from Fairfax, Virginia and has lived in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Paris, France. Yanik is currently bibliographer for the Southeast Asian Bibliographic Database <http://seasia.museum.upenn.edu>. He enters data for scholarly works so that archaeologists worldwide can view and download the information for their bibliographies. Yanik is also interested in film production, photography, and languages. ♦

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