

# The Lao "m"pression



Volume 3, Issue 1

March 2007



## Dear Friends

**He has saved us and called us to a holy life, not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.**

2 Timothy 1:9

Greetings in 2007! Another year, full of opportunities!! Opportunities to do more of what God has planned for our lives! So, keep your eyes opened, your hearts ready and your hands active.

## The Opium Curse

In the past, Laos was a major producer of opium. That has changed significantly. Officially, Laos grew about 2,500 ha of opium in 2006, down from 27,000 ha in 1998. This does not mean that the opium problem is solved and which was clear from our recent excursions to villages in Phongsaly province.

For years, opium provided one group of remote villages with a relatively stable source of income since opium could be easily exported out of the mountains in low volumes. Opium dealers got rich while villagers earned enough to make it worthwhile growing. We visited several villages which had done well enough that families had constructed decent wooden homes with tin sheeted roofs. Some even had satellite dishes and motorbikes. But, what was surprising for us was that the motorbikes were in most cases parked in the houses and not used as there was no longer enough income to purchase fuel to keep the motorbikes running. Despite adequate outward experiences some of these villages were tethering on the edge of falling into serious food shortages.

There was a second group of villages that were opium consumers and according to both district and village information, had never produced opium. These villages were the poorest villages we visited. Opium addiction was taking its toll as the price had tripled. Some opium smokers were spending the equivalent of \$2 US per day and were wasting 4 to 5 hours each day smoking opium. One of the saddest sights was to see young addicted teens.



*Husband and wife smoking opium*

One man that we met has been smoking opium for about 23 years. His wife joined him in this habit 5 years ago as her health was not good and she had no other medications to turn to, so opium was her opiate. They wanted to stop as they realized that by continuing to smoke opium their village could never develop. Chomchaekao village noted that one of their first priorities was to hold opium detoxification for the users. The villages really wanted to work together to construct a road to the village, but too many in the labor force were unavailable due to the bad habits they were immersed in.

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## January Happenings in Xieng Khouang

January was a special month for our project in Xieng Khouang. We packed in four days full of events. Let me tell you about one of those adventures during those four days!!

In January we completed two six-room classrooms along with two dormitories in different villages to increase the opportunities for children to study past Grade 3. Most children in the remote villages can only study to Grade 2 or 3 since the villages are small and that is the highest grade that can be offered at the village level. Now more children will be able to continue their education!! During January we officially handed the schools and dormitories over to the village and district authorities. During this ceremony I was required to give a speech in Lao language!! That was a real stretch of my ability to speak Lao!! But it went very well and the villagers appreciated the Lao Proverbs that I used during my speech. **“One stick cannot make the fence, if we do not agree together, we cannot do anything”** and **“Don’t dream about the 10 kip across the river, instead, use wisely the 2 cents that is in your hand.”**



*First Speech in Lao during school handover*

In the photo you will notice a cameraman recording video footage. We invited Lao National Television to produce a 20-minute video of our work in remote villages in Xieng Khouang. You might get a chance to see that video someday!!!

## Bull fighting

Hmong New Year takes place some time in December of each year. One of the biggest

events during that time is the bull and cow fighting that takes place. Prize bulls can fetch a great sales price so the atmosphere is very



competitive. Villages become empty as everyone comes out to the stadium arena where the bull fighting takes place.

During the festivities, the special Hmong dress is worn. The photo here shows the typical dress worn by Lao women and girls.



## The Mystery

Your guesses were:

- ❖ a musical instrument
- ❖ a rain stick
- ❖ a locally made cannon
- ❖ a planter for seedlings
- ❖ a mouse trap
- ❖ a candle or incense holder
- ❖ for distilling palm wine from the lontar palm sap
- ❖ a rare Air Canada plane part that got lost over Laos
- ❖ a peace pipe

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- ❖ a tool to use when laying down a tile floor - to help keep it straight.
- ❖ a marijuana or opium pipe
- ❖ a feeding tube for a pet
- ❖ something used get a fire going
- ❖ a bong
- ❖ A ceremonial device used for making fancy smoke rings
- ❖ a liquid container or dosing apparatus

And the correct answer is.....

### A PIPE for smoking tobacco!!!



Tobacco is put in the small extension and some water in the large tube. Smoke is sucked through the water and then blown out of their mouth or nose (depending on their level of expertise). Some users will smoke a bit of opium with the tobacco, but not just opium by itself. Opium users have a different pipe which you can see in the photo on page one. In Hmong villages at least, this pipe is only for private use and has no ceremonial significance. Hmong ceremonies involve a lot of rice wine which is offered on every occasion possible.

This bamboo pipe can be found in most highland villages. And there are even a few in Vientiane, although for the most part, here in Vientiane, former users have converted to cigarettes since they are quick and easy to prepare. A few users have combined old and new by using the bamboo pipe with cigarettes placed in the small extension!!

### AN Update on the family

A lot has happened since we last wrote. Starting with a two-week holiday in Burma, followed by a busy month of work in January. During it all we have been fighting off some attackers! Moe Moe had the worst case of headaches in her life, four weeks straight of daily headaches. Thankfully that situation has improved. Moe Moe, Mike, Monica & Matthew all had cases of rough coughing bouts. Matthew has been waking up each day just before 6 AM with a hacking cough for ten minutes straight. Then he is okay for the rest of the day. Mike is dealing with some back pain due to tensed up muscles. In addition, the children picked up a light case of chicken pox. Maria had 5 spots, Matthew 8 and Monica about 40. Now all these issues seem to be clearing up!!



*Circus performers*

The circus from Vietnam came to Vientiane. On Friday night in the middle of February we took the children to see the circus performers. They enjoyed it immensely. Their favorite performance was the clowns with the hats who came on stage every now and then while other acts were setting up.

We have heard that back home in Canada you are having headaches getting passports, especially since they are being required in order to travel to the US. For us, we face that kind of situation on a regular basis. In the past it took 1 to 2 weeks to renew a passport and that could only be done in Bangkok, Thailand. But now there is a new process and our passports need to be sent back to Canada to be renewed. So, that means that we were without passports for over a month. If an emergency comes up, we would be stuck with a pretty big headache. Fortunately, the passports are here, but as soon as they arrived we had to send them to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a week because we also needed to renew our visa to be allowed to stay in Laos!! This visa has actually run out in

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the middle of January, but we needed our passports before we could renew the visa. So, we were "*illegally*" in Laos for a few weeks!

Mike will be in Canada for a few days to join meetings in Grand Rapids. But with the rest of the family still back in Laos, he won't be staying long (arrives in Canada on March 10 and returns to Laos on 19)!!

The most exciting news though is that Moe Moe applied for and has been offered a job as School Nurse, at the school where the children study, starting in August 2007!! This is a great opportunity for Moe Moe to get back on track with her nursing career while still being close to the children. Working hours are completely in line with school study hours!!

## What's That For?



Take a close look at the photo above. What could it possibly be used for? Boy, are these getting tougher to guess or is it just my imagination! Send your best guess to Mike at [fivemfamily@gmail.com](mailto:fivemfamily@gmail.com)  
The mystery will be unwrapped and exposed in the next newsletter!!

## Prayer Requests:

- Praise God for our precious children who are a great source of learning and adventure.
- Pray for Moe Moe as she prepares herself for re-entry into nursing work.
- Pray for safety for the family in Laos while Mike is in Canada for

12 days and for productive meetings for Mike and CRWRC.

- Praise that we had a refreshing time with family in Burma and a rewarding month back at work.
- Pray for wisdom in finalizing a proposal to work in Phongsaly and favor in the sight of the authorities responsible for approving the project.
- Pray that once the project is approved we can also identify the best funder for the proposed activities in the project.
- Pray also for CRWRC in Laos as we continue to look for one additional community development expert to join us here!



**CRWRC USA**  
2859 Kalamazoo Ave SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49560  
Phone: 800-55-CRWRC (27327)  
Fax: 616-224-0806  
E-mail: [jonest@crcna.org](mailto:jonest@crcna.org)  
Website: [www.crwrc.org](http://www.crwrc.org)

**CRWRC Canada**  
3475 Mainway  
PO Box 5070, Stn Lcd 1  
Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8  
Phone: 800-730-3490  
or 905-336-2920  
Fax: 905-336-8344  
E-mail: [deroost@crcna.ca](mailto:deroost@crcna.ca)  
Website: [www.crwrc.org](http://www.crwrc.org)

**CRWRC LAO**  
PO Box 4224  
Vientiane, Lao PDR  
tel: 856-21-313-071 (Office phone)  
Home: 856-20-20-71237  
856-21-315-168  
Email: [fivemfamily@gmail.com](mailto:fivemfamily@gmail.com)



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