

RURAL LIFE AND ECONOMY IN THAILAND

Most of the pictures in this series are from northeastern Thailand, the poorest part of that nation which over the centuries has been ruled by all of its neighboring cultures and now contains parts of the Khmer (Cambodian), Laotian, and Thai influences. These photos were taken between September 1963 and August 1965.

1) In the early 1960's the main means of travel from Bangkok to northeastern Thailand was by rail. The roads were very rough and in places they also were deemed extremely unsafe. Thai Railways then had first, second, and third class cars.

2) Steam locomotives had been replaced in the Thai rails by 1960 except in the Northeast where they remained in freight service until about 1966.

3) There were no diners on the passenger trains in the Northeast, but at each station vendors came through the cars selling chicken, sticky rice and lechee nuts wrapped in banana leaves which then served as your plate..

4) The stations seem quiet, but just wait...

5) Already some vendors are getting ready for the imminent arrival...

6) others wait calmly in the shade...

7) Buses, such as this one, will take you to (or bring you from) distant villages and cities. Usually the top is reserved for baggage, but if necessary people can ride up there. Inside you count on riding along with small livestock...

8) This village lies next door to the Teachers Training College on one side and the "city" of Mahasarakham on the other. Note the electricity wires serving ashop just outside the College gate, and the College itself.

9) Growing rice requires much water, something that in the slightly arid Mekhong plateau is precious, indeed. Villages are typically situated adjacent to a lake, a stream or river, or a canal.

10) Thai houses were typically built on stilts because flooding was both welcomed (for the crops) and frequent.

1i) In the village center is the Buddhist wat, or temple.

12) The home and family of one of my students, Watana Gasang. He stands on the open porch. He was the first generation of his family to go to school beyond the primary level. Before he entered the Teachers College he'd never seen a railroad, electric lights or the telegraph. A brilliant student, he was later accepted by the University of Iowa where he earned a degree in engineering.

To his left is his mother, his sisters, brothers and the family dog are on his right. The kitchen is the small building to the right. The living/bed room area is the larger building to the left. The family eats, socializes, welcomes guests on the porch, or if it's raining under the house.

13) On those perfect days – and there are lots of them – life happens around the village store.

14) In bigger towns, such as the provincial capital, the stores are specialized. The store on the left serves noodle soup, and sells cigarettes and batteries for transistor radios. The store to the right (only slightly visible) sells cigarettes, laundry soap, toothpaste, instant coffee, a few canned goods, and matches.

15) Too lazy to cook for yourself? Here's the roving, hot soup restaurant! Ah, the equivalent favorite of every child: the ice cream truck! For a penny or two he'll set up shop under your house and lunch will soon be ready!

16) As part of our responsibilities we supervised out students doing practice teaching in village schools. The college's land cruiser, a gift from UNESCO. This school was built by the U.S. Army after some war games in the area. The front greeting area also served as the teachers lounge.

17) A typical school room in a Thai village school had a blackboard, benches and tables. Students were separated with the boys on the left and the girls on the right. Books were almost non-existent.

18) A classroom inside that American built gift school.

19)

20) Another of our students in front of his home (doing practice teaching in his home town, too).

21) This student teachers' quarters in yet another village.

22) The town square or the temple yard are places for kids to gather and play

23) or to have their pictures taken by roaming foreigners.

24) This boy of seven or eight, desperately wanted to have his picture taken.

25 & 26) A hot game of jacks. Not even time to pay attention to the photographer!

27) The rainy season begins in April. Once the ground is soft and fertile again, saturated by the rains, it can be plowed,

28) It takes a family's adults, children and their water buffalo to prepare the paddies for planting...

29) Thai school years begin in June and run through February. Children are available for their families to help in the preparing of the fields and the initial sowing of the rice.

30)

31) The rains continue through June and maybe into July. By late June the rice is pulled up from the paddies, swung around to shake off much of the loose mud.

32) The it is replanted so each individual plant will have room to mature.

33) For the next six to eight weeks there is little to do but to watch the rice grow and keep the paddies wet.

34) and watch the family's water buffalo swim, and maybe you'll take a dip, too.

- 35) that bath is life saving for the water buffalo during the hot season
- 36) If there's no pond or canal nearby, some nice mud will do just fine!
- 37) Shelters in the fields provide temporary homes at harvest time, to ward off would be thieves, and to facilitate the hard work of the harvest.
- 38) By late September the land has dried and the rice has matured.
- 39) very late in the afternoon this harvester is carrying bundles of rice plants
- 40) others are harvesting the rice plants
- 41) it may be taken only as far as the field shelter before night falls if your fields are far from your village.
- 42) Ultimately your rice is taken to the village's threshing floor. Threshing is considered a woman's work (reaping and carrying are man's work). At the village threshing floor the straw is piled neatly. During the cold season it will be used to cook food and for insulation. The pole coming out of the straw pile with the rice plants tied near its top is an offering to the spirits. Buddhism does not recognize gods or spirits but ancient beliefs die hard, and villagers do not want to take any chances with their family's well-being...
- 43) the rice-grain is taken from the stalk by hand, then tossed in the air to separate the grain from the chaff.
- 44) Rice is not only cooked but some of it is ground into flour for the making of noodles and other delights. (Remember, noodles come from Asia, not from Italy.)
- 45) To make noodles, rice flour is mixed with water then put in a can or small pot with holes in its bottom, and forced into a much larger pot of boiling water.
- 46 & 48) Some rice flour will be baked into pancakes..
- 47 & 49) another important source of food are fish caught by gill nets, from this the fish will be removed once the boat and fisherman return to town. These are single person and as many fish as are willing occupancy boats.
- 50) Another village task is the making of ropes. (incidentally, this picture was taken from the actual bridge over the River Kwai. Sisal or hemp when harvested must be dried in the early summer (March) sun.
- 51) some is beaten into pulp, bundled and shipped to Bangkok where machines will make the rope and from those factories the villagers will earn a little much needed money.
- 52) and some will be used by the villagers to make their own ropes.
- 53) This woman is not cooking up a fine pot of lunch! She's boiling silk worms, and when she finds a loose strand in the pot she winds it on the spool above.

54 & 55) later it will be dried, dyed, and woven into silk cloth. (These photos come from a village outside Chiang Mai in northern Thailand where the cloth is being made for export at least to Bangkok, and then to ...

56) In villages, women often use the shade under their homes to weave the silk cloth that will become their family's clothing.

57 - 60) If a village is able it will have its own wat, and if possible, at least that part of the temple we might call the shrine, is to be made of bricks.

61) In southern Thailand, some villages raise tobacco.

62) The government owned tobacco monopoly buys and handles this crop.

63) Although this photograph is from Penang in Malaysia, it could be in Thailand. This man is drying red peppers. He walks on them to turn them over so all sides can dry.

64 & 65) In one northern Thai village residents make umbrellas. They use bamboo for the wood, and rice paper which they paint and decorate.

66) Also in northern Thailand, with help from nearby Burmese tribes and remnants of the old Nationalist Chinese army, silver coins are beaten into bowls. In the bottom of each bowl a mark indicates how many coins were used to make it. That determines its price.

67) In good year, there may be rice to be sold in the provincial market

68) also baskets,

69) or firewood,

70) or vegetables.

71 & 72) Wealthy farmer, may have a cart load or more of rice for sale.

73) Every morning at dawn the provincial capital town's market opens. Some of the merchants are there every day, month after month, and some just have goods to sell occasionally.

74) Here fish are being sold by the kilogram – a modern innovation!

75) When you've sold all you brought, you might buy something special for tonight's supper.

76) For some, a day at the market may be just enough to give you a splitting headache!

77)

78 - 80) In Northeastern Thailand in many places is very poor, and their temples reflect that. Others are more prosperous and their temples reflect that. Rich or poor, every wat is sacred, and every likeness of the Buddha is worthy of a stop for a prayer or two, or just contemplation on the faith of the Thai people.