

In the 1960's the Kingdom of Laos had two capitals. Luang Prabang, a land locked city in northern Laos, was the royal capital and Vientiane on the Mekhong River was the capital of the Pathet Lao, as Moaist Communist uprising. The Pathet Lao were finally victorious in 1975, the king abdicated the thron and the nation officially became the Lao People's Democratic Republic whish it is to this day. Given the political climate of South East Asia in the 1960's American citizens were barred from entry into Burma, Laos, and until early in 1964 Cambodia (and then not again once Pol Pot became the ruler of that nation). However, as I learned almost as soon as I was in Mahasarakham, Isan people have relatives in both Cambodia and Laos, and political borders mean little to them. Indeed there were no customs offices on either the Thai or Lao sides of the border, nor were there any guards. Passports? Who needs one? You just hire a boat and cross the river.

Whatever I expected to see in Vientiane, what I found was a small, almost all but deserted town. My fellow teachers, of course, chatted with relatives. After a couple hours, we returned to the river landing, and the same boat that had brought us across, took us back to Thai shores. And we continued on our way.

Such trips around the Northeast were an important feature of the curriculum at the Teachers' Training College of Mahasarakham. Many of the students who attended the College had only been to the provincial capital for their secondary education, but since as teachers they would most likely find jobs anywhere in northeastern Thailand (or even beyond) educating students to the world in which they'd be living beyond their two or four years of college education was important. In my two years in northeastern Thailand, I visited every one of its provinces and most often as a part of a college excursion.