Letters by Frederic Benson. 1968

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1 July 1968

Greetings —

We arrived in Harpers Ferry (pop 500) this afternoon — we came by train.

So far I am quite satisfied with IVS. There are about 30 altogether, several of whom have been in the Peace Corps in SE Asia.

Yesterday evening — shortly after our arrival — there was a get-together in a park near the hotel. This morning we had to go to the IVS office to sign the contract etc, This lasted until about 11:00. The rest of the day until 3:00 was free — enough time for a trip to the capital and environs.

By the way, IVS has volunteers only in Laos & Viet-Nam, none, at the present time, in other countries. This far we have met the entire IVS staff, including the exec. director. They will be with us at Harpers Ferry all week.

During the week there will be talks by various people familiar with SE Asia, and talks with ~~people~~ volunteers who have returned from there.

By the way, enclosed is $40 — I won't be needing it for anything at present, and I would rather not have it lying around. There is something like a $12.50 per diem expense check given us, and if it isn't changed, $150/mo. expence check in Laos.

Enough for now —

[illegible]

Los Baños
~~20~~ July 1968

Greetings,

Everything is well. We just got back ~~Thursday~~ Thursday after spending 3 days in a barrio (village). We were two to a village - we spent our days with an agricultural agent from the University. The village I went to was about 25 miles from here. We went there by bus. When we arrived we went out to the rice field and planted some rice. We spent the night in the house of one of the villagers. Tues. & Wed. we spent drawing a map of the village, and inspecting projects which have already been completed.

The trip from Alaska to Tokyo was 6 hours. As this made for a rather long day, most of us went to bed when we got to the hotel in Tokyo, which was next to the airport. The next morning we left for Manila (via Okinawa). After arriving in Manila we went to Los Baños, which is South of Manila. While here we are staying in a Student Christian Center - we - along with 12 Japanese who don't speak English - are staying in a single room, especially constructed for the occasion by putting up a partition across the back quarter of the social activities hall.

On Sunday (we arrived on Saturday), we went to see the volcano at Lake Taal - it last erupted this spring. We spent most of the day there and went swimming in the lake.

Next week we begin sessions on rice. The remainder of this week will be concerned with vegetable production and bamboo engineering. Our classes begin at 8:00 am, go until about 11:00, and resume at 1:30 for a couple more hours.

Our group here numbers 15 - 5 are going to Laos, and 8 to Viet Nam. There are 2 IVS volunteers - one from Laos and one from Viet Nam - who came here and are in charge of the group, both for the duration of our stay here and for the in-country training. For us going to Laos, we will be spending 2-3 weeks in Vientiane, and the rest of the time (4 weeks) in Vang Vieng, a small town north of Vientiane.

[signature]

Did you send the number of the bank account to IVS??

Los Baños
30 July 1968

Greetings -

Today is the last day of classes here - tomorrow is, for the most part, free. On Thursday we leave here and go to Manila. Originally, we were going to stay in Manila Thursday night, and then fly to Bangkok on Friday afternoon. However, we are now attempting to get our ticket changed so we can go to Bangkok on Thursday afternoon. We would then be there until Saturday afternoon, when we fly to Vientiane.

We spent all of last week learning about rice. This included lectures in the morning and field work in the afternoon. The fieldwork consisted of plowing with the water buffalo, repairing dikes, transplanting seedlings, etc.

We had half of Saturday and all of Sunday free. On Sunday we went to Pakisanjan waterfall. This waterfall is at the head of a deep gorge, and is accessible only by dugout canoe. We got the boats several miles below the falls, and proceeded upstream. En route we had to pass over 16 rapids, which we shot on the way back.

1 August

Today we (the 5 of us going to Laos) go to Bangkok until Saturday. Although classes ended on Tuesday, we have an evaluation of the training period this morning (Thurs.)

The weather here has been, for the most part, quite hot. Last week, however, a couple of typhoons hit and there was a lot of rain and wind for a few days.

I have not yet contacted Nancy P. This is due to the bad relations at present between Philippines and Malaysia over the Sabah problem.

All for now

Jerry

Vientiane
8 August 1968

Greetings,

Well, I've finally made it to Laos. We left the Philippines last Thursday for Bangkok. We got out just in time — the earthquake hit Manila Friday morning. We — the five of us plus the VS training officer from Laos who met us in the Philippines — stayed in Bangkok until Saturday afternoon, while there we looked around the city, and paid a visit to the Student Christian Center, the place where we stayed a couple of years ago.

Saturday afternoon we flew to Vientiane. We were met at the airport by the VS rural development staff, which is composed of a Chief of Party plus 2 asst Chiefs of party. That evening we wined and dined at one of the local French restaurants.

While in Vientiane we are staying at the VS guest house, a place for VSers who are in from the field. Its not a bad place, complete with air-conditioned rooms, refrigerator, etc. Across the street is the USAID compound, which includes offices, the commissary, etc. We usually eat our lunches there — American food. Almost everything in the way of food is at the commissary — while we are in the field we can order stuff from there and it is flown out

(at no cost).

Our time now is spent studying Lao. We begin at 7:30 in the morning and go until 1:00 — we are in 2 groups and taught by 2 Lao. Our afternoons are spent doing a variety of things — checking into the commissary, getting shots, meeting with Lao officials (yesterday we met with the man in charge of Rural Devel, today we ate lunch with some people from the ministry of agriculture), etc. etc. In the evening we eat supper in the local restaurants (Korean, Chinese and Indian, the last 3 nights), and return to our house to study Lao. As a result of this rather tight schedule I have not yet had an opportunity to come into contact with the daughter of the ambassador.

A week from today (Thursday) we head out into the field for about a week, while there we will follow around an USAID who ~~has~~ works there — we will each head out to a different place.

The trunk was here when I arrived — everything intact. By the way, I think I'll be sending my monthly checks home — you can deposit them in my checking account. This way I can just write checks when I need money, and I won't have to have all lying around here.

All for now. I'll be sending a few rolls of film in a couple of days.

Jim

P.S. Did you get my 2 letters from the Philippines?

— Send me the deposit slip for the check enclosed —

Vang Vieng, Laos
29. Aug 1968

Greetings —

I believe when I wrote I was about to depart on a several days long field trip. Originally I was supposed to go to the Thakek area — Thakek is located south of Vientiane on the Mekong River. As the air connections between Vientiane and Thakek are bad, I was supposed to fly from Nongkai, Thailand (across the river from Vte.) to Nakorn Phanom, Thailand (across the river from Thakek). On the appointed day I went to Nongkhai, only to find out that my plane left the day before — the IVS office in Vte. made a mistake...

Instead I went to Luang Prabang — the royal capital of Laos — which lies about 300 miles north of Vte. on the Mekong River. I flew up on an Air America cargo plane — Air America hauls things for USAID. I spent several days in Luang Prabang — I stayed with an IVS volunteer and went with him out to the villages where he works. Luang Prabang is quite a nice town located in the mountains — I took quite a number

of pictures there. You have probably received the 4 rolls of film I sent to you last week. I sent another roll today. When you get the developed slides, put numbers on the boxes and put them in a safe place. While in Luang Prabang we took a boat trip up the Mekong to some caves located on the river edge.

By the way, I sent my second living expense check to you today. Be sure to put this money in my checking account - I will write checks here as I need money. Keep the deposit receipts and send them to me. Also, have the bank send my cancelled checks to me.

After a few days in Luang Prabang I returned to Ute for a couple of days. We then came here to Vang Vieng. We drove overland through the mountains. (V.V. is north of Ute). Vang Vieng is rather nice - it is located in the mountains. Vang Vieng is the

location of Tom Dooley's 1st hospital, which is still here but now used as the local government offices. Our training officer - an IVS volunteer - who met us in the Philippines is stationed here. Thus, we came here. Our group is split in half and we are living in 2 houses. The house I am in (the first few shots on the roll of film now in my camera) is built on poles (like all Bao houses) and has bamboo walls and tin roof. Although we have a kerosene ~~stove~~ refrigerator and gas stove we have no electricity or running water. We have a maid who cooks all meals (except breakfast) and keeps the place clean. We usually have pancakes for breakfast and rice for lunch and supper. The food is quite good (it has been all along) and I have not lost any weight - if anything I have gained. The food here is quite cheap - about 50 cents apiece per day, excluding the stuff we have sent up from the commissary, which consists of pancake and cake mix, etc.

While here we have language

study in the mornings - our 2 fan language teachers from Vte, come with us and our living and eating with us. In the afternoons we do number of things: we have had instruction in the operation of a jeep and radio, and we have spent time fixing up our house. Today we pumped water from a well to a tank mounted on poles, which is the water supply for our shower. The poles weren't too strong, however, and once we got the tank filled up the poles gave way and the ~~tank~~ full tank fell and broke. Hence, no shower.

We have still not received our final assignments, and we won't until we leave V.V. Our assignments are based on our interests and what type of area we want to work. The chances are that I will be doing a combination of survey and community development work.

Mark

P.S. I received your letters - It is not necessary to send the wedding gift - However, send ~~the~~ The book, etc.

VANG VIENG, LAOS
15 September 1968

Greetings,

We have just received our field assignments - I will be working in a town called Moung Kassy. Moung Kassy is about 30 miles north of Vang Vieng - last week we went up to Moung Kassy for a day to visit a IVS volunteer who does agriculture work in the area. He is the only American there, with the exception of about 12 Americans who are building a road from Vientiane to Luang Prabang. However, the Americans who work for the BPR (Bureau of Public Roads - an agency of the US Govt) will be moving out next ~~week~~ months to another location further up the road.

I will be doing survey work at M. Kassy. ~~Although~~ Survey work is a new position for IVS - one other IVS volunteer is doing some survey work, but, as far as I know, I will be doing it full time.

I am not yet sure exactly what kind of survey work I will be doing. Generally, however, it will probably involve finding out why people plant rice when they do, dig wells in certain areas, etc. I will be primarily concerned with studying Lao culture in relation to this.

After the orientation and training is completed in Vang Vieng, I will probably spend some time in Vientiane and in Moung Phieng, a town located on the Mekong River south of Luang Prabang. The other IVS volunteer doing survey work is located there, and I will see what type of work he is doing. I will then go to M. Kassy. The first 6 months or so will be spent studying Lao culture, etc and the Lao language — it will be necessary for me to know Lao quite well.

A USAID representative is stationed in Vang Vieng, and I will probably be working rather closely with him.

The training is continuing as before. We are, however, spending some time in the villages. Each week we spend a night and day in a village - we go to the same village 4 times; each one of us goes to different villages. ~~Each~~ We live with a Lao family, and have to speak Lao as nobody speaks English. In the day we ~~have~~ go out with the villagers to the field. I have been to the village twice. The first time we harvested rice on a highland field - it was about a 3 mile walk to the field. This involved wading across rivers and streams, through jungle and water holes full of leeches. The second time to the village we went fishing in the irrigation ditch for the lowland rice field

I have been getting your letters - it takes a week or 10 days. Concerning the slides: the green house in Ute is the IVS Guest House. The one after that from the ~~on~~ river is the crossing from Nongkai

Thailand to Laos. The pictures taken while flying are of the Luang Prabang area. The one of the large boats were practice races for a big festival in Luang Prabang. The picture of the woman carrying the load on her head in the Philippines was intentially blurred.

Have issues of Asian Survey been coming? Would you send the issue of Asian Survey with an article on spirit worship in Northern Thailand - it came out sometime last spring. Did you send that book yet?

I sent another role of film last week. All taken at Vang Vieng. There might be a couple from Mouang Kassy. If so they are at the end of the role (or maybe at the beginning of the one I am now shooting). The last of these pictures is of a plane landing at M. Kassy - the 2 or three pictures before that with a number of mountains in the background are taken from the house I will be living in.

PS. I just got your last letter - I don't know what sense used on boat pict. as I don't know which boat pict you are referring to.

Jim

7 October 1968
Vientiane

Greetings –

The orientation is now over – we came back to Vientiane last week. My final field assignment has been changed from Moung Kassy to Ban Talat (near Ban Keun), which is located a short distance north of Vientiane (about a 2 hour drive). The reason for this change is the expected deterioration of security in the M. Kassy area.

Ban Talat, which is located on the fringe of the Vientiane plain (a short distance from the mountains), is a relatively well developed area. A large and new bridge spans the Nam Ngum River at Ban Talat, and a large dam will be built there shortly. I will be the only US volunteer in this area. There is, however, an American USAID rep. living there.

My title is "Sociological evaluator." This means that through observation, survey, etc. I will evaluate the effectiveness of USAID projects in the area. This

"observation" will be my full-time job and I will not get involved in the distributing of cement & other commodities, a task which virtually all other Americans in R.D. are concerned with. This type of work has previously not been done (from the sociological point of view) to any extent in Laos so it is a new field. At any rate, it is a rather ideal job and should be quite interesting.

Before I go to Talat, however, I will spend about 3 or 4 weeks in Moung Phieng, a town northwest of Vientiane near Sayabury. I will fly up there on Tuesday. The reason for going to M. Phieng is that there is an IVS er there doing work which has some connection with what I'll do. Also, the USAID representative there has had experience with the type of work I'll be engaged in.

Once I do get to Talat, however, it will probably be some time before I will actually begin to carry out research projects. As I will be working almost exclusively with villagers (studying their attitudes, etc) (with occasional guidance from USAID) it will be necessary to learn the language well. More about my job later when I have more information.

This week has been spent getting rested up. We did, however, have a meeting with the ambassador, and I have had a couple of meetings with the IVS staff and certain USAID

people who I will be working with.

As far as I know I have gotten all of your letters (including the book) - it usually takes them from 5-10 days to get here.

Concerning your proposed trip: I would recommend spending less time in Manila, less time in Taipei, & visiting Angkor. During the time you are in Vientiane I will undoubtedly be able to leave my post and come down (especially since I will be relatively near Vte.)

Are copies of Asian Survey being sent to you??

How did the pictures turn out on the last role of film I sent? I think some of them may be overexposed. If the picture of my group turned out satisfactorily, would you send me a ~~copy~~ print (not too big) of it?

Enclosed is my check.

More from Mouney Pheng,

P.S. Would you have the County Clerk send me a ballot for the election?

Moung Phieng, Laos
27 October 1968

Greetings,

I am now in Moung Phieng (9 Oct.-5 Nov.), a village of about 3000 population, including 4 IVSers. M. Phieng is located in a valley, and the IVSers stationed here work with agriculture and home economy (a married couple does this) and refugee relief and village leader training. There is also an American USAID employee here working on an irrigation project. While here I am living with the latter three, and am observing the work of the IVSer working with the training program. The reason that I am observing (and helping) him is because he is beginning to collect information (through interviews, etc.) with which he can evaluate his program. The program is designed to establish village committees which are elected by the villagers and designed to promote village development projects. The members of the elected committee will go through a one week training session designed to teach them how to identify and solve problems concerning development. We are now trying to measures with which to evaluate the effectiveness of this program.

Although I have been mostly concerned with the above since coming here, I have also observed the work of the IVSer working with refugees. There are a rather large number of refugees in this area, most of them being ~~Meo~~ members of the Meo and Yao ethnic groups. These people, who have been driven south by the P.L., come originally from southern China. They are the world's largest opium producers, and are more sophisticated and ambitious than the Lao. Unlike the Lao, they are animists and eat non-glutinous rice. So far I have spent a night in a Meo village and a night in a yao village.

Last week-end the three of us hiked to Moung Nan, a village located norht of Sayabury near the Mekong R, We went by jeep to Thadeua, a town north of Sayabury on the river. We then crossed the river and walked for two hours before arriving. We stayed with two IVSers stationed there. We returned to M. Phieng on Sunday.

Other than this, there has not beem mush more going on. Last night there was a boun, or religious festival. These are rather festive occasions held at the local temples.

Have you been getting my slides? Would you start sending the individual rolls back to me after they have been developed? I want to look at them and label them. Also, would you send me 5 rolls of Ektachrome film (asa 64). One more thing - as it is getting quite cool here now, would you send a sweater (the tan one I bought in Nepal). Next week (Tuesday) I return to Vientiane and on Wednesday (I think) I will go to Ban Thalat. As of yet a house has not been found for me so I will probably spend a period of time living in the US AID compound there - I think there are some rooms there for visitors to stay in.

All for now

Dick

Ban Thaalat, Laos

17 November 1968

Greetings,

I just arrived in Ban Thaalat the day before yesterday--my trip here was originally scheduled for the 7th but was delayed; hence, I spent one more week in Moung Phieng. I went from Sayaboury to Vientiane on 12 November and was there for three days. While in Vientiane I was quite busy getting ready to come here.

Thus far, I am quite pleased with Thaalat. Although Thaalat is presently not listed on any maps (it is located a short distance west of Phone Hong and a short distance north of Ban Keun) it is rapidly becoming a booming town. This is due primarily to the fact that a dam is being built near here. It is also the location of the largest and best bridge in Laos which was built quite recently.

As I explained before, the dam is being built by a Japanese construction company. (The bridge was built by a Danish company.) At present there are about 40 Japanese engineers working here; they are living at a camp constructed when the bridge was built and which is the site of the USAID compound here. For the time being I am living at the camp in the guest house (the Japanese are living in barraks). There are two rooms in the guset house; the director of the dam project is living in the other room. I will later move into a house (when I find one).

The USAID COMMUNITY Development Advisor and his family also live in the camp. He and his family has been in Laos for four years (he has two sons, aged 7 and about 1)--all of them speak Lao fluently. There are about 15 Community Development Advisors working in various places throughout Laos.

Since coming here I have been looking over the area

and meeting various people, such as the local military commander, the police chief and the chou moung (administratively Laos is composed of 16 provinces; each province is broken up into moungs and districts). USAID has given me a new motorcycle to use for transportation. I am eating my meals in a local restaurant for $24/ month. I am not sure yet exactly what kind of projects I will work on here--I will spend the first several weeks looking around this area and getting the feel of things before I decide what to do.

I have just received your mail from the past month since coming here--a mistake was made in the IVS office and my mail was sent here instead of M. P hieng. As far as I know I have received all of your letters to date. Inclosed in one of your recent letters was a copy of your proposed itinerary; it appears to be quite good and I have no suggestions to make regarding it. Concerning my joining you for a week or so outside of Laos I can make no definite committment at present--when I take my vacation will depend on my project scheduling.

Did you get the roll of film I sent last week? Have you sent the sweator I requested yet?--it is getting rather cool here

All for now--

1 December 1968
Ban Thalaat, Laos

Greetings,

Everything is well here. During the two weeks that I have been here I have been mostly studying Lao and learning about the area. The North Nam Ngum area covers three moungs: Phone Hong, Ban Keun and Phanthaboun. Next week I will be spending time in the last two areas to get an idea of conditions there. I will probably not really have much work until January or February when a training program gets underway here at the training center. Until then I will be studying Lao and reading abiut evaluation, etc. I will for the most part be trying to find out the attitudes of trainees and others toward training. The first training program will be held to train village leaders about leadership.

About all of the things you have sent--books, sweator, food, etc.,etc.--I have received it all. Although all of the food will be eaten with relish it is not necessary for you to send any more--most all of it is available in the commissary. As I said before I am eating all of my meals in a local restaurant . Once I move into my own house which will be furnished with refrigerator, stove etc. I may buy certain items from the commissary to suppliment my diet of rice.

Concerning the sending over of other items for Christmas it is not necessary since I have no felt needs at present. I may, however, have you order a couple of books for me at some point in the future. Concerning my sending of items home, it will not be until some time after Christmas. That is mainly because there aren't many things to buy around here--there is no handicraft business in Laos. As a result I haven't purchased much as yet. When I go to Vientiane in a month or so I will get something. That also goes for Christmas cards. They are not available around here.

About the war in Laos--it is quite impossible to get away from it. There is fighting going on at all times, especially in the south and in the Ho Chi Minh trail region. For the most part, the western parts of the country, e.g. Moung Phieng

Phieng, are quite secure and there is a minimum of action. The areas of action, however, are always changing. At present the Ban Thalaat area happens to be one of these areas of action. Certain Lao military operations are pushing the P.L. southward out of the mountains. They are thus driven into the laps of the troops from the Ban Thalaat camp. At present there are up to 200 of the enemy running around in the forests to the east of Thalaat. It is believed that a rather large number of these are Viet Minh. Although this area has been on alert for the last couple of days the army has about 400 troops in the area protecting the dam site and the bridge, as well as the place in which I and the USAID family is living. In the event of an attack there would be ample time in which to evacuate by helicopter or vehicle.

Concerning the itinerary you sent, again I say that it sounds quite satisfactory to me. Concerning the temperature: as I said before it will probably be quite warm in March.

This is the sum total of events that have happened here since my arrival. My Lao is coming along quite well and within the next several months I should have it down quite well. I will be sending pictures of the area as soon as I take some. As I implied before, I have found a house in the village and hope to move into it as soon as possible, hopefully within the month. A number of repairs have to be made, however. It will be good to get out of the USAID "compound" and training center area. There are always Americans coming up here from Vientiane to see the dam, etc., so things are usually quite hectic in the compound.

All for now,

P.S. 2 December
am now in Vientiane.
The P.L. (100) got within
4 miles last night so
we took off from Thalaat
at 10:00 p.m. by helicopter.
However, as the situation is
improving now, I will probably
go back up by chopper tomorrow.
Waggoner went back up today.

Ban Thalaat, Laos
13 December 1968

Greetings,

I am now back in Ban Thalaat. As I explained in my last letter we were evacuated on 1 December. We came back here on the 5th. On the 3rd, however, myself, Mr. Waggoner and a military attache came back up here by helicopter to check on the security situation. We talked to the local military commander and flew in the helipopter over the area where the P.L. were located for a look. We didn't see anything, however, since the area is all thick forest. We then returned to Vientiane. Originally, Waggoner and myself were going to commute from Vientiane to here daily--work during the day and sleep in Vientiane during the night. We would have had a plane at our disposal for this purpose. However, the ambassador later concluded that this was not necessary, so we made only the one flight here before coming up here permanently on the 5th. Since returning there have been no problems, except for a few incidents about 15 km. away early this week. Accompanying this letter are pictures of the Ban T halaat area taken from the air. It is possible to see the bridge, camp (where I am now staying, located at the one end of the bridge) and dam site. The P.L. were located on the other side of the dam (above the dam).

I hope to be moving out of the camp soon. I have located a house about midway between Ban Thalaat and Phone Hong. The house is owned by the wife of a general who was killed in a plane crash near Thalaat last year. She is moving out of this house to the house next door. It is rather nice house (USAID rents them) and I will have running water, electricity, stove, refrigerator, etc. I will not do my own cooking, however--it is too expensive to live off the commissary. I will have somebody buy food locally and cook it.

I have spent the last several days in Ban Keun (located south of Thalaat) with Waggoner. The first group of people who will be in the leadership training school will come from this area, so I have begun to look over this area with that in mind. We will be going back there next week for a few days.

If you are watching television (the Huntley-Brinkley Report) in the next week or two you will probably see a report on the Nan Ngum dam and some of the recent events that have occurred in the area. There were some people here today taking pictures of the area.

I received your last letter (25 Nov.) today. If you heard about the A.A. plane crash in Thakek you no doubt heard about the trouble near Thalaat. I didn't know anybody on the plane; there were only a few USAID people, the rest being Lao. As far as IVS accomplishing anything in the field, yes, they are. Without IVS USAID would have a very difficult time implementing any kind of program in the field.

To repeat, I will not get anything off to you in time for Christmas. This will have to wait until I go to Vientiane sometime in early January. Also, I have received EVERYTHING you have sent to date.

Well, all for now. I will ~~pre~~ be spending Christmas here in Thalaat.

Mark

PS. Enclosed is a check