

Life in a Vietnamese Village

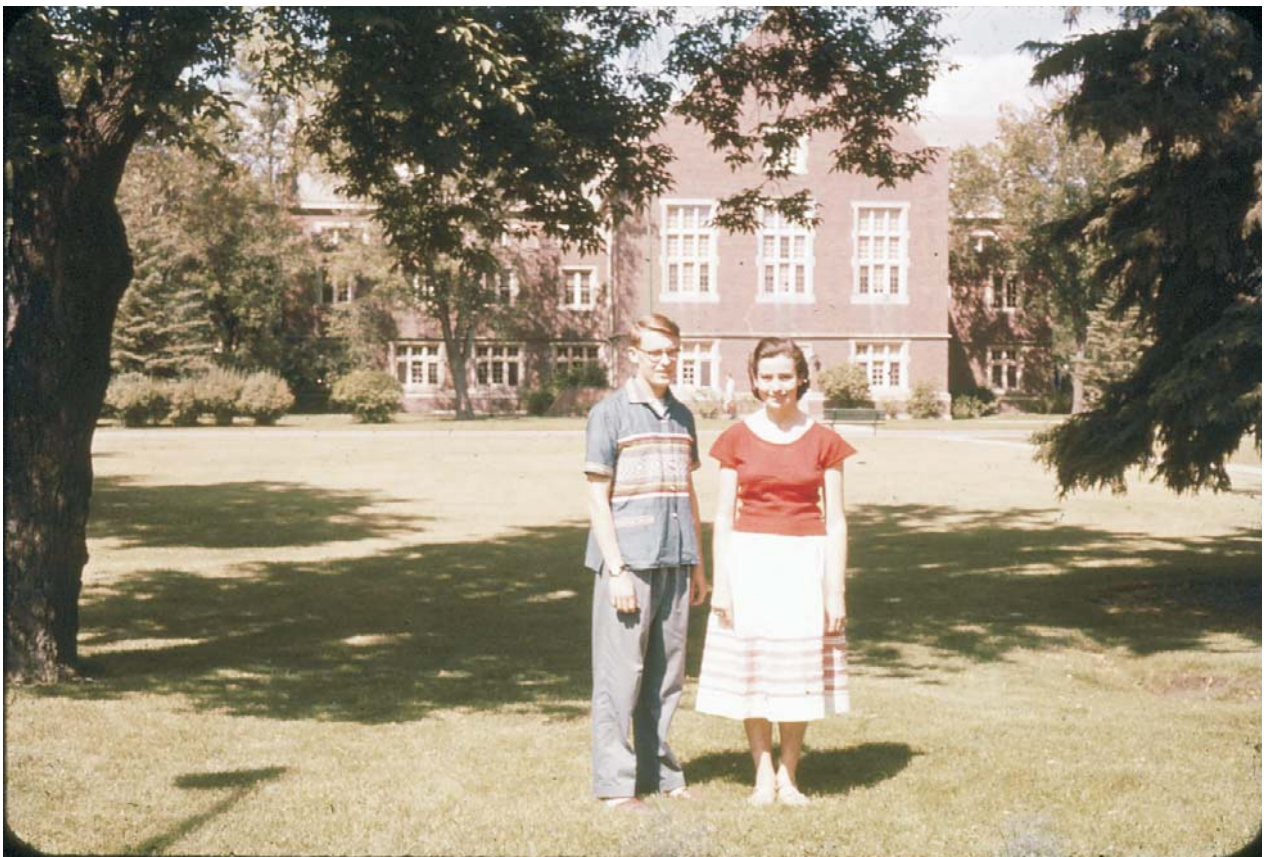


This presentation uses slides taken 50 years ago. Some of them are a bit mouldy, but after 50 years we are a bit mouldy ourselves, too. We were in Vietnam to do Bible translation. We were not tourists: we lived among the people, You may be surprised at some of the things we tell you, but we have to tell the story as it is.

First of all, we had to get to our Vietnamese village . . .



We had been in the jungles of southern Mexico learning how to live in primitive conditions. (This proved very useful when we later retired to a village in the Yorkshire Dales.) We travelled by air and coach to the University of Grand Forks, North Dakota, near the Canadian border. There we spent three months studying advanced linguistics.

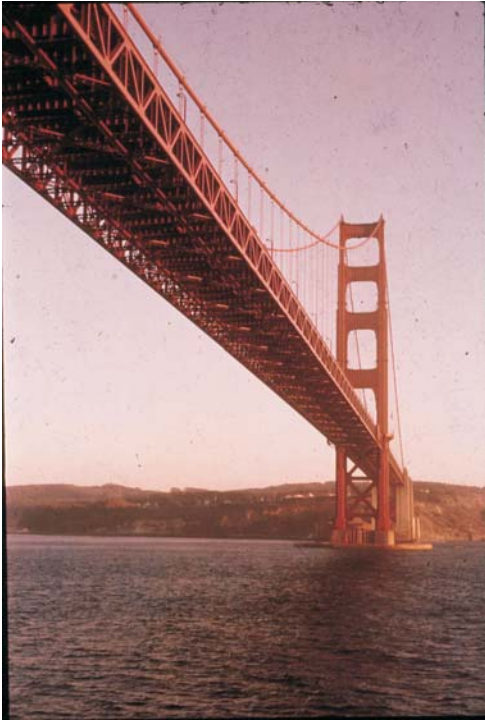


From Grand Forks we travelled by Greyhound coach to San Francisco on the west coast. We travelled through South Dakota, Montana, Utah, Nevada and on to California.

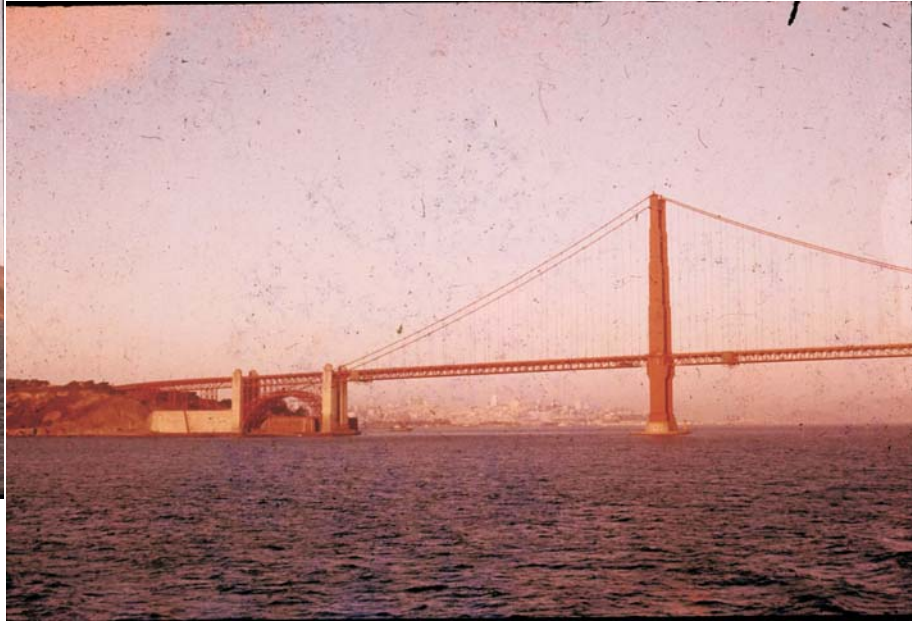


This is looking across the Golden Gate bridge to San Francisco beyond. The Pacific lies through the bridge to the right. We boarded a Norwegian merchant ship which could take 12 passengers. There were only us two and the wife of an American major.



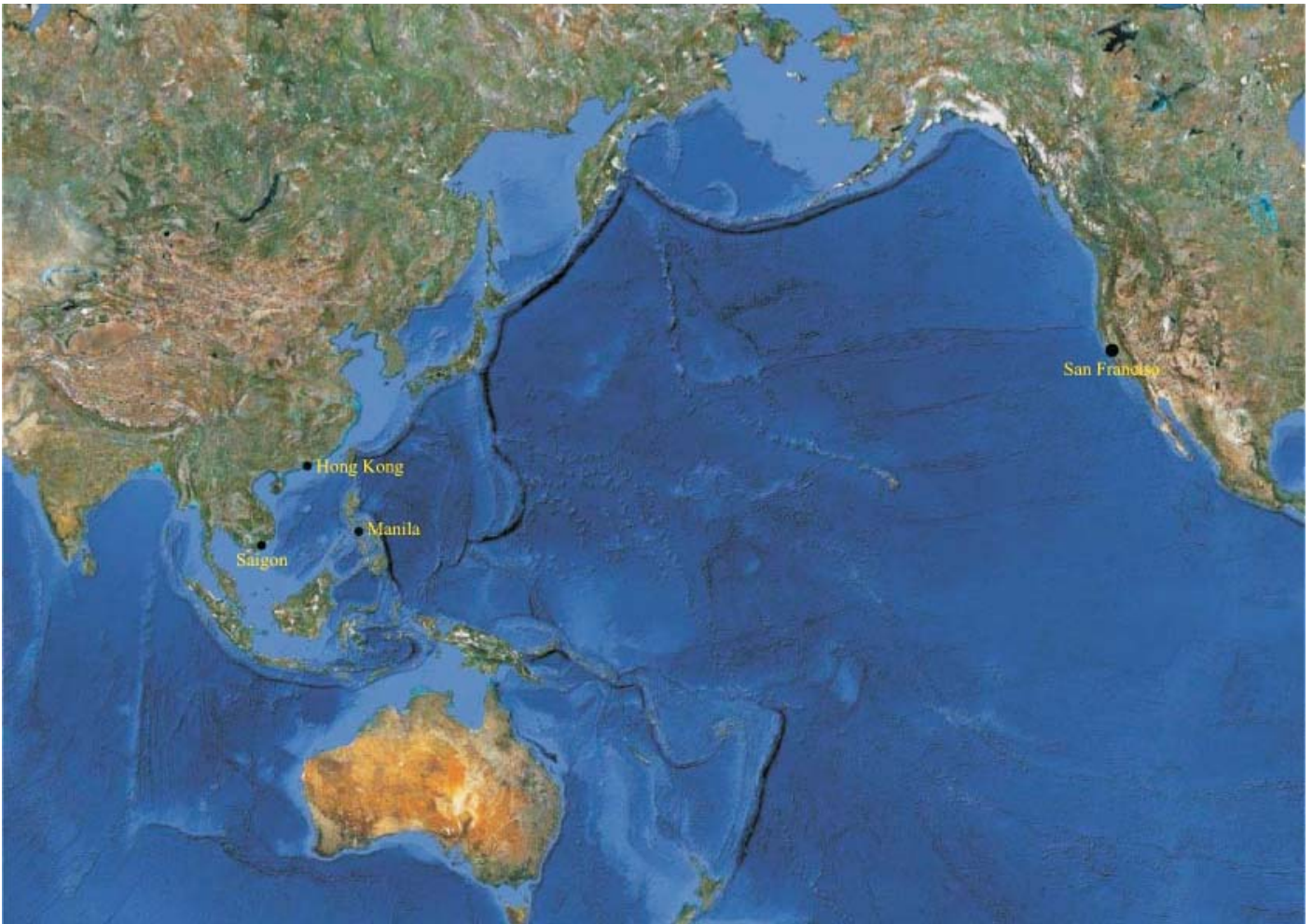


Then it was our time to sail under the Golden Gate bridge out into the Pacific. For a while we could still see San Francisco in the distance.



Then the bridge and all the land faded into the mist. This was the last major land we were to see for several weeks.





Our voyage took us from San Francisco across the Pacific, calling in Manila and Hong Kong until we arrived in Saigon. Most of our view consisted of the ship, though over the side we did see flying fish and hammerhead sharks. There were also some wonderful sunsets. September 21 1960 was a day we never lived. Why? Because we crossed the International Date Line and went straight from the 20th to the 22nd.





Eventually we travelled up the Mekong river leading to Saigon.

Our first home there was the group house which Bible translators shared when they came in to Saigon. We lived here for five months whilst we were learning Vietnamese.



This is the lounge in the group house. The temperature in Saigon was often 90° with high humidity, so there were no glass windows, only shutters.

The French left tree-lined boulevards where taxis patrolled.





We studied with a young Vietnamese man in a building belonging to Saigon University.

Vietnamese is a tonal language. Every syllable must be pronounced on one of six tones. These are not fixed notes, but rather different tunes. They are indicated by marks over or under the vowel of the syllable. So, for instance, the six words below are all different in meaning because they are on different tones.

má	mother
mã	‘equine’
ma	ghost
mả	tomb
mà	but
mạ	rice seedling



Several Vietnamese girls used to help by cleaning and cooking in the group house. When eating their meal, they are used to squatting on the table. Give them stools and they will squat on the top of them.

They are wearing working dress, which consists of a blouse over black trousers. Jean is here wearing best dress, consisting of a long dress slit to the waist over trousers, the whole topped off with a 'lampshade' hat.





Here are the same cooks going to church in their best dress.

You have to beware of young women in the street. An American missionary was preaching in the street in Vietnam when a group of young women came up and laughed at him. He did not like this, and wanted to say, 'I don't like all you girls laughing at me.'

Tôi không thích các cô cười tôi

I not like all girl laugh me

To his alarm, the girls laughed even more. The trouble was, instead of the sentence above, what he had really said was, 'I do not want all you girls to marry me.' Wrong tone!

Tôi không thích các cô cưới tôi

I not like all girl marry me



Here is a typical scene in downtown Saigon at that time. In front of the bookshops there are men in casual dress and women in the long dresses.

Goods can be transported hanging from both ends of a carrying pole.





Then you can squat down and sell your wares. The far seller may have a charcoal stove in one basket, so she can serve hot food.

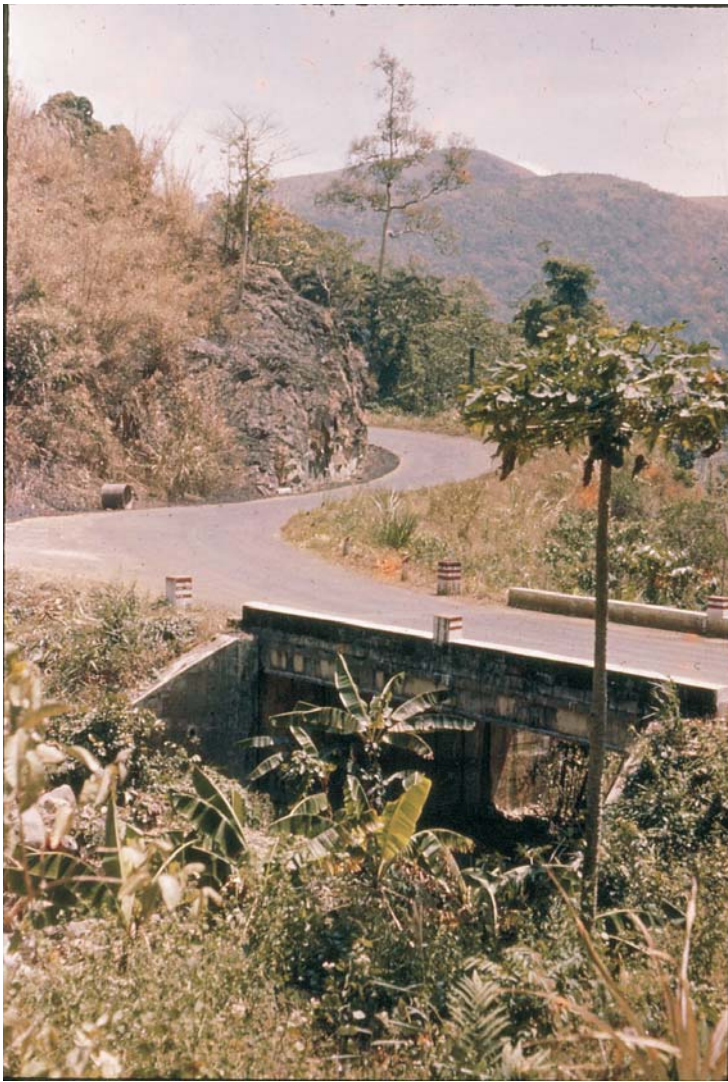
A common means of transport was the 'cyclo', a sort of tricycle rickshaw.



Five months in Saigon brought changes for us in the shape of our firstborn, Graham.

The Bible had already been translated into Vietnamese. We needed to study a language which did not have the Bible, and for that we had to move upcountry out of Saigon. We planned to study a language called Tho. The country at that time was divided. Refugees had come from a triangle of towns in communist North Vietnam. We travelled out of Saigon to a village called Nam Son near to Tung Nghia.





The main road between Saigon and Dalat winds upwards into hill country. Wild bananas grow in profusion.

Strange rock formations are situated near wayside cafes.





Nam Son was two miles west of the main road, a refugee resettlement village in dry dusty land.

The village chief gave us permission to set up temporary home in the village hall. The children were always round watching everything which the foreigners did.

Then we discovered that these people were Nung, not Tho. We had to move to the main road.





So finally we arrived at our Vietnamese village - Tung Nghia. It lay on the main road between Saigon and the hill town of Dalat. It was a refugee resettlement village for Tho, Chinese, White Thai and Black Thai. The Thai colours do not refer to neckwear, but to the colour of blouses which the womenfolk traditionally wore. The main street had some shops. The sign to the left of the man crossing the road reads 'Haircut' and underneath 'Shampoo'.

Our street went off to the east from the main road in the background. Some could afford corrugated iron roofs, whilst others made do with thatch.





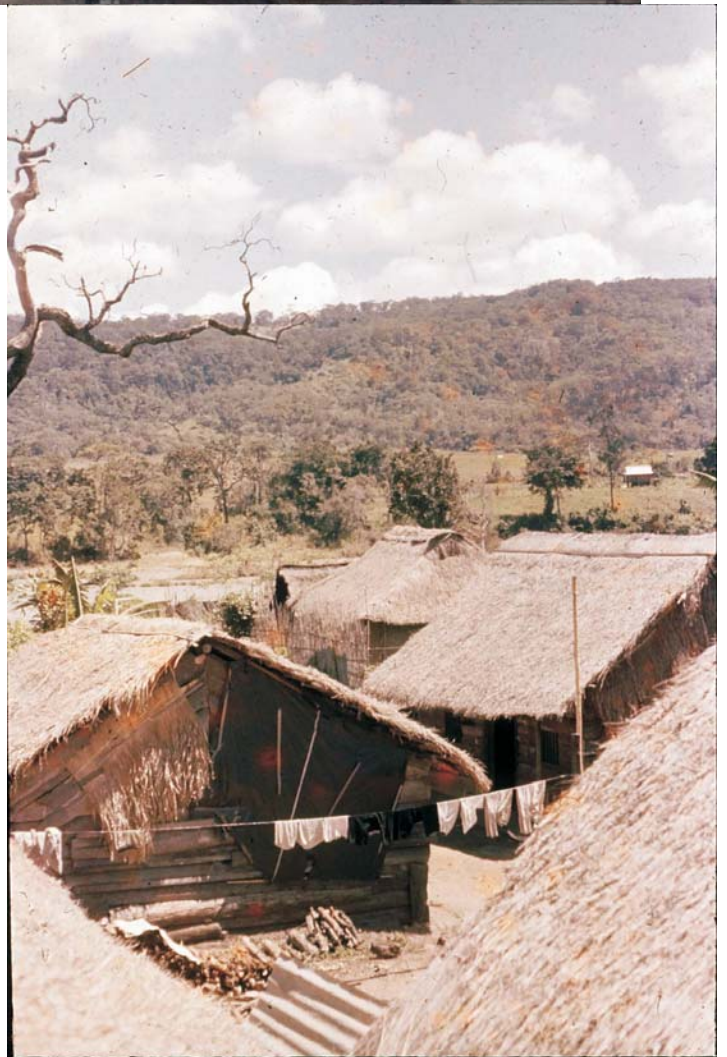
The house we bought was not very prepossessing. The boards were those cut from the outside of the logs (and therefore cheapest) having one side round and one flat. There were shutters but no glass windows. It obviously needed rethatching.

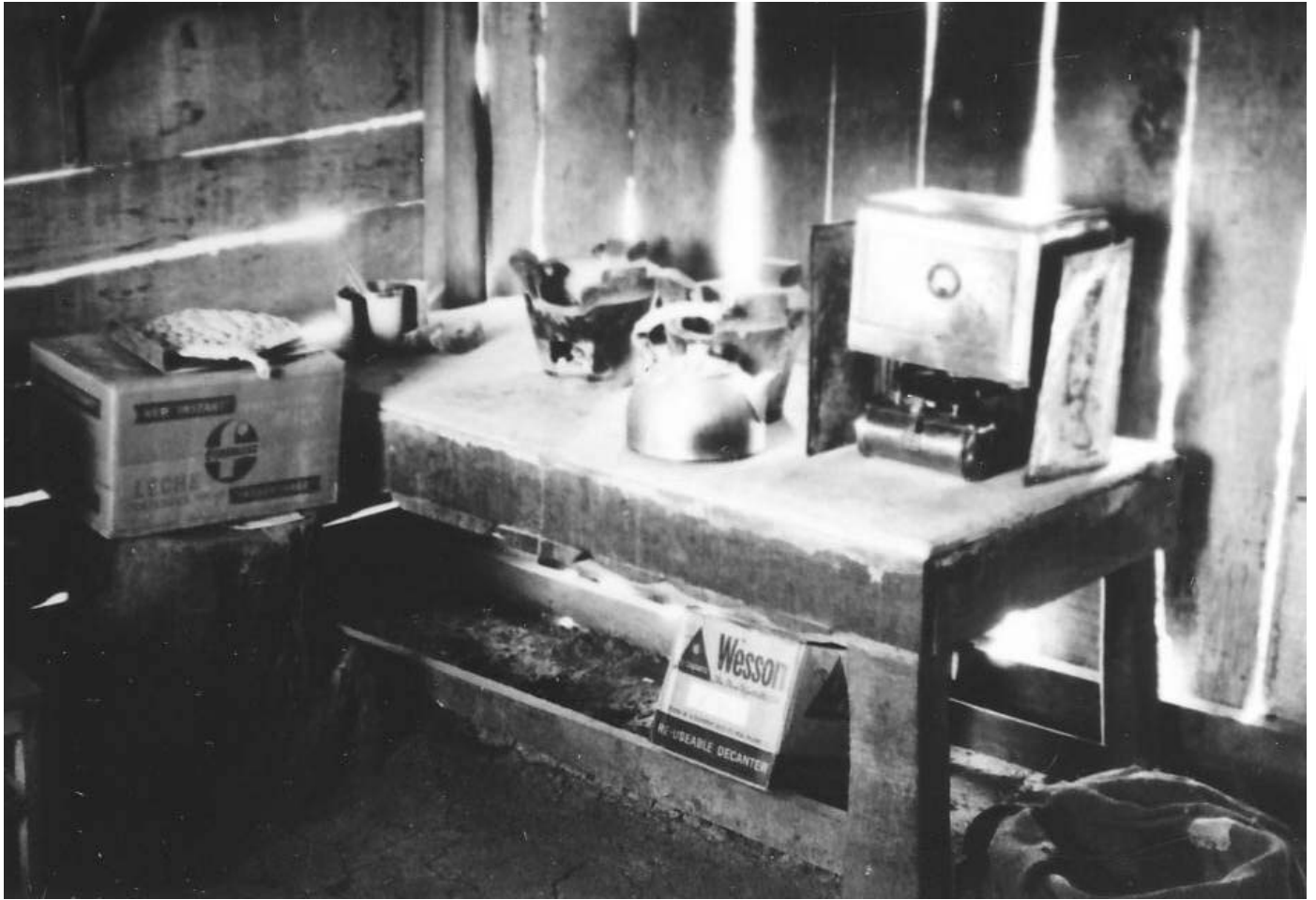


The surprising thing was that the Nung of Nam Son made thatch panels from long grass, fastened with bamboo strips. Nung women carried them over to us.



We paid our neighbour to put the panels of thatch in place. When he had finished, the view from our rooftop showed our house looking like all the others around.





The kitchen attached alongside our house was basic. On a table topped with concrete we had a charcoal stove (to the left of the kettle). The paraffin pressure stove on the right is underneath an oven which I made from a five gallon paraffin tin. The thermometer on the front of it was taken from an oven thrown out as scrap.

You can see that ventilation was no problem here!



Many people passed by, especially the children here looking over our fence. On the dirt track they would play a game with stones. They threw some into the air, then had to collect others before catching those falling.





The dyeman would sometimes come by, with his vat on one end of his carrying pole and a charcoal fire on the other. He would dye your clothes any colour you liked so long as it was black.

Another time this water buffalo came past. It looks ferocious, but you should have seen the little child who was leading it. It was quite docile really.



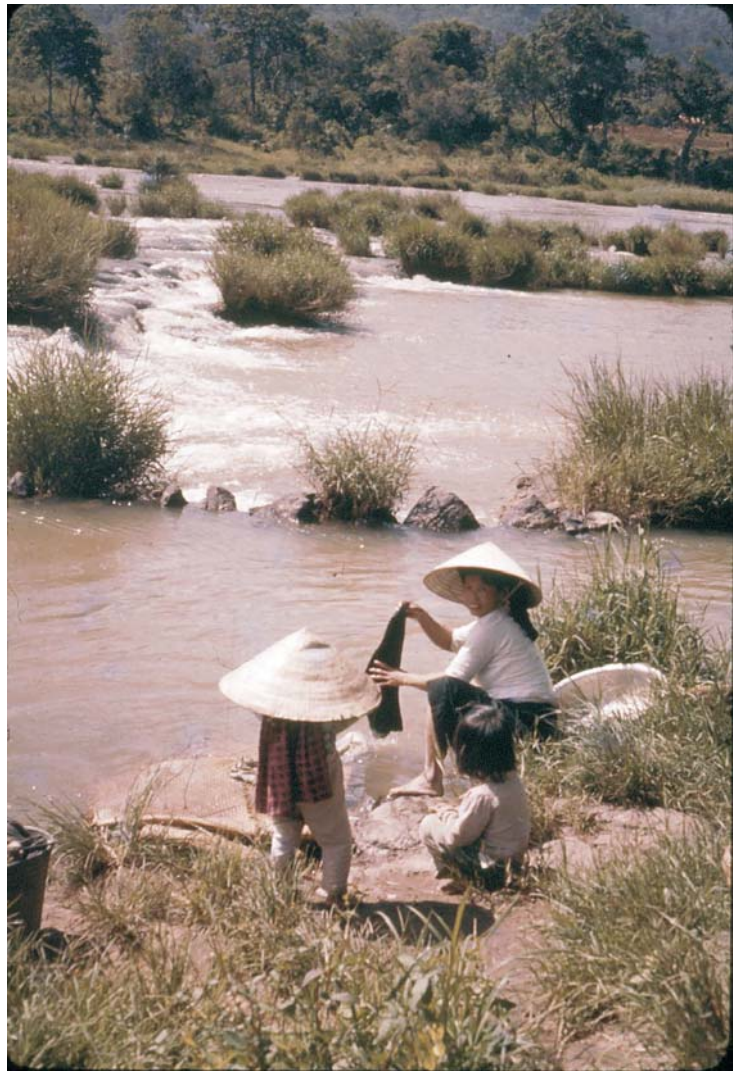


Graham could sit in his carriage on the porch. He was a great help to us in our life in the village. People would 'borrow' him for a little while, and he always came back smiling. They liked to entertain him and perhaps spoil him. The fact that we trusted them to look after him helped in forging relationships with them.

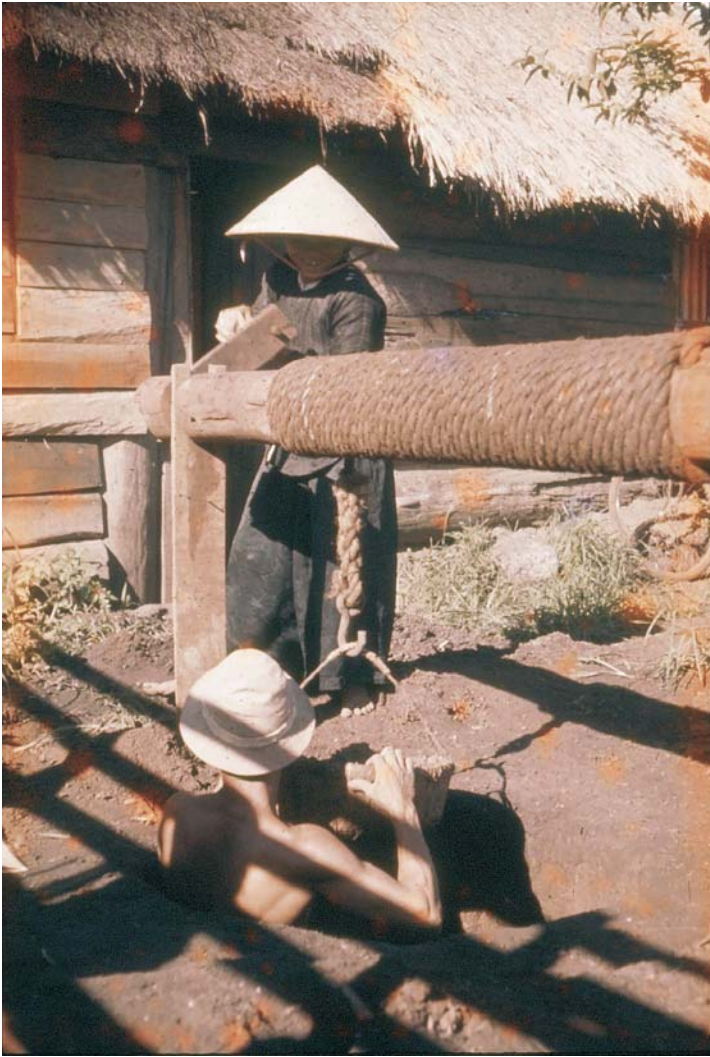
One old lady would drop in on us at any hour, and would enjoy holding Graham.



There was a Laundromat in our village.
Our neighbour used to go down there to
wash her clothes.



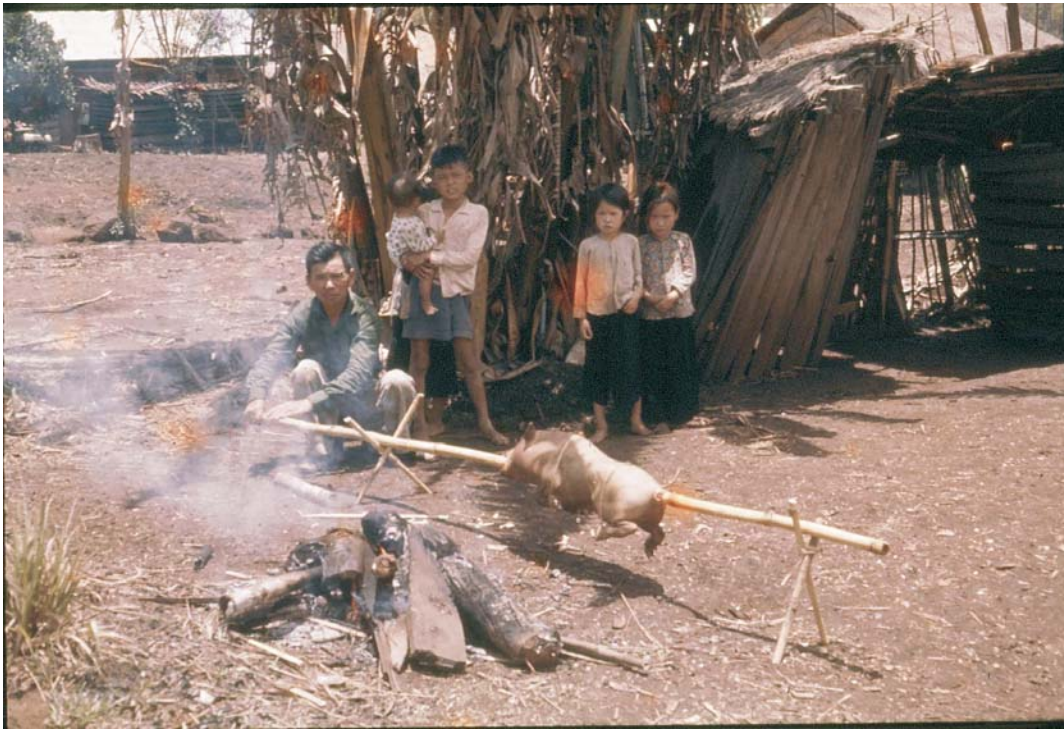
The path down to the river went between our house and hers, so we were surprised to find one day that it had been blocked. We found out that there was illness in her house. A Tho animistic priest had been called in, and his diagnosis was that the ‘neighbourhood spirit’ was annoyed by the tramping past the house. Much ill-feeling was caused by this barricade. After a little while it was removed.



We had a well dug in our garden so we did not have to go down to the river for our water.

When it was completed (in a different site because the first one did not strike water) we could pay a neighbour to do our washing at it. We pumped water into an oil drum in which our possessions had been shipped. Then a hose pipe leading into our kitchen meant that we had running water on tap.

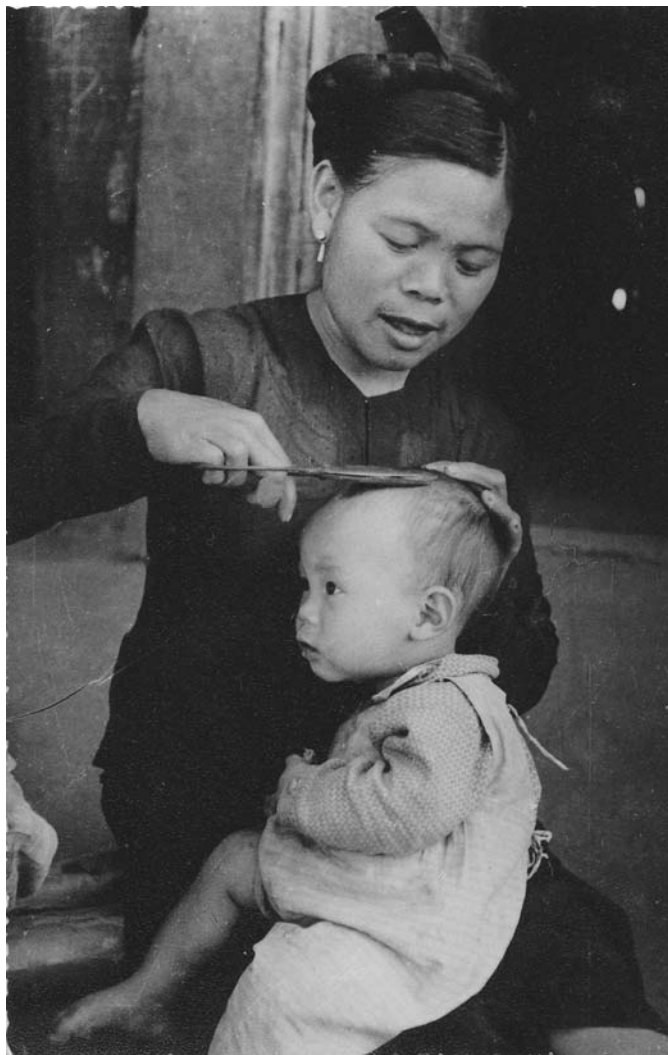




You could have a barbecue in our village. All you needed was a pig and a pole.

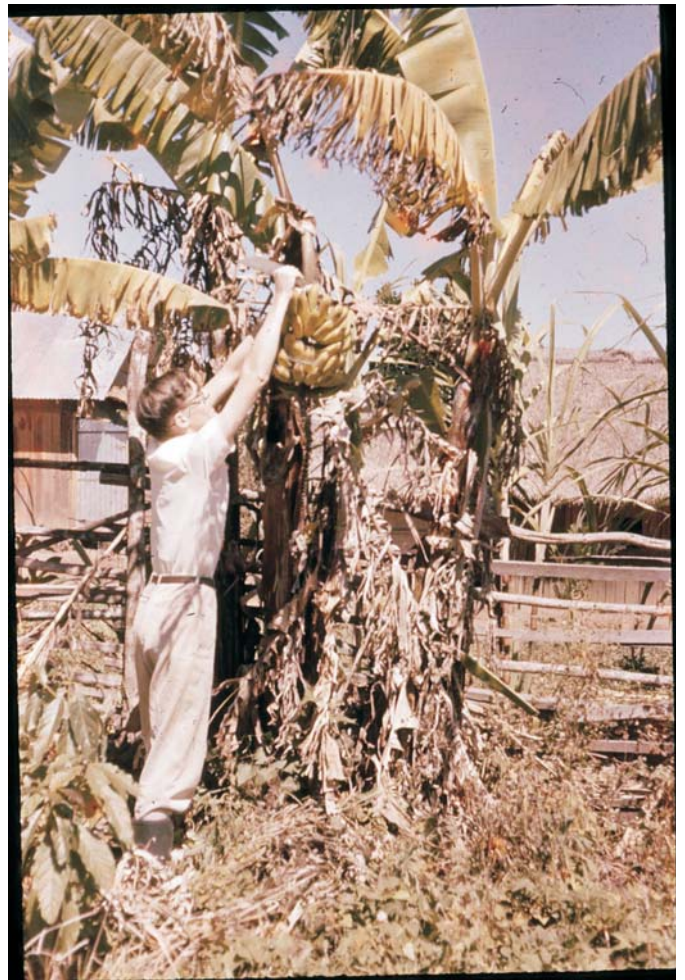
Small children could be seen carrying even smaller ones on their backs. Jean got a carrying bag for Graham. We wanted to be as like the people as we could.





Haircuts were needed both for our neighbours' children and for Graham.





We hired a Vietnamese woman to cook, clean and look after Graham.

You could cut your own bunch of bananas in our garden. Under each petal a hand of bananas forms. When hands no longer set the rest of the flower can be cut and cooked like cabbage.



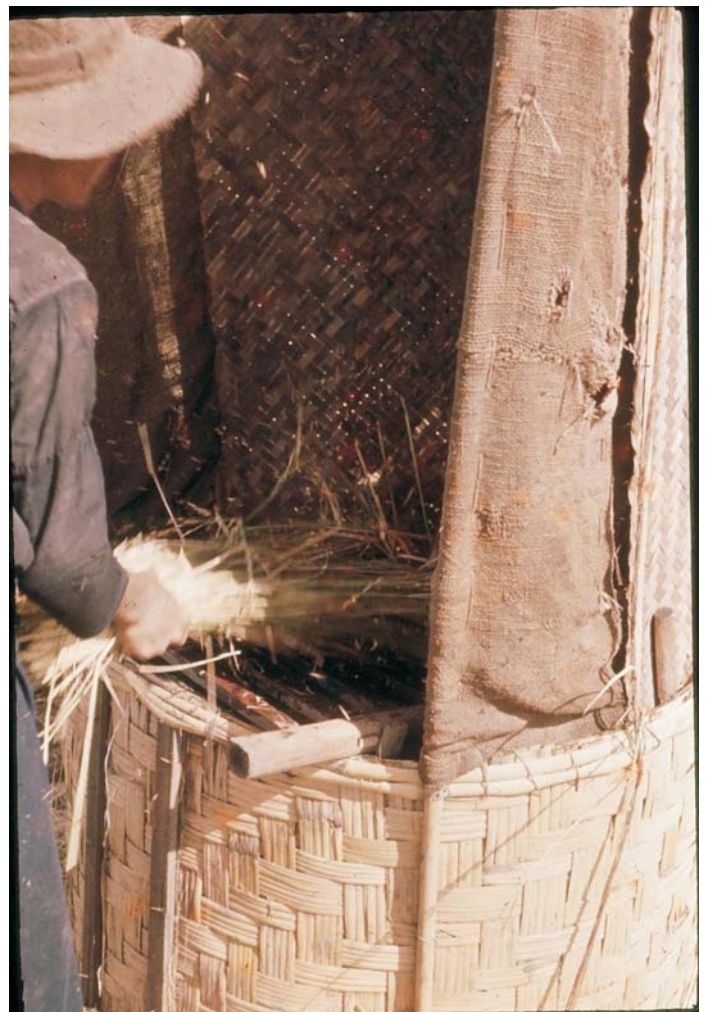
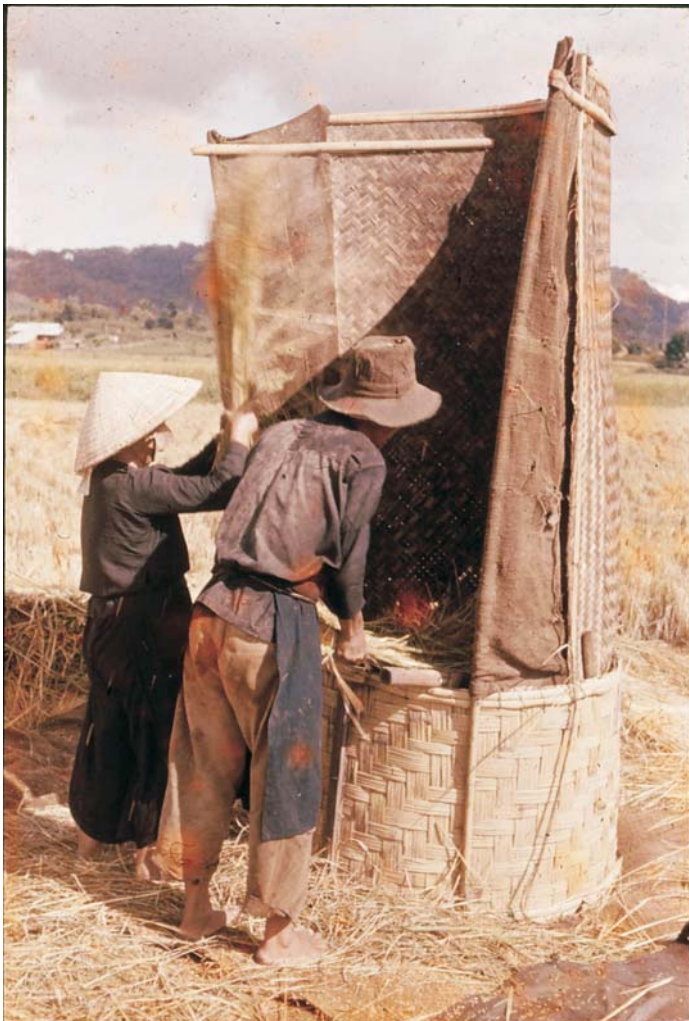


Our hedge was not privet but hibiscus. On a trellis we grew delicious passion fruit. The biggest one weighed 9 pounds (3.9 kilos).





Near the village some could plough and plant rice. This was a variety which grew in dry fields, not the one for flooded paddy fields. Bunches when reaped could be threshed by hitting them on a grid of bars so the seed fell into a basket below.





Every day there was an open air market in the centre of the village. You could buy fruit and vegetables, or even a duck - live!

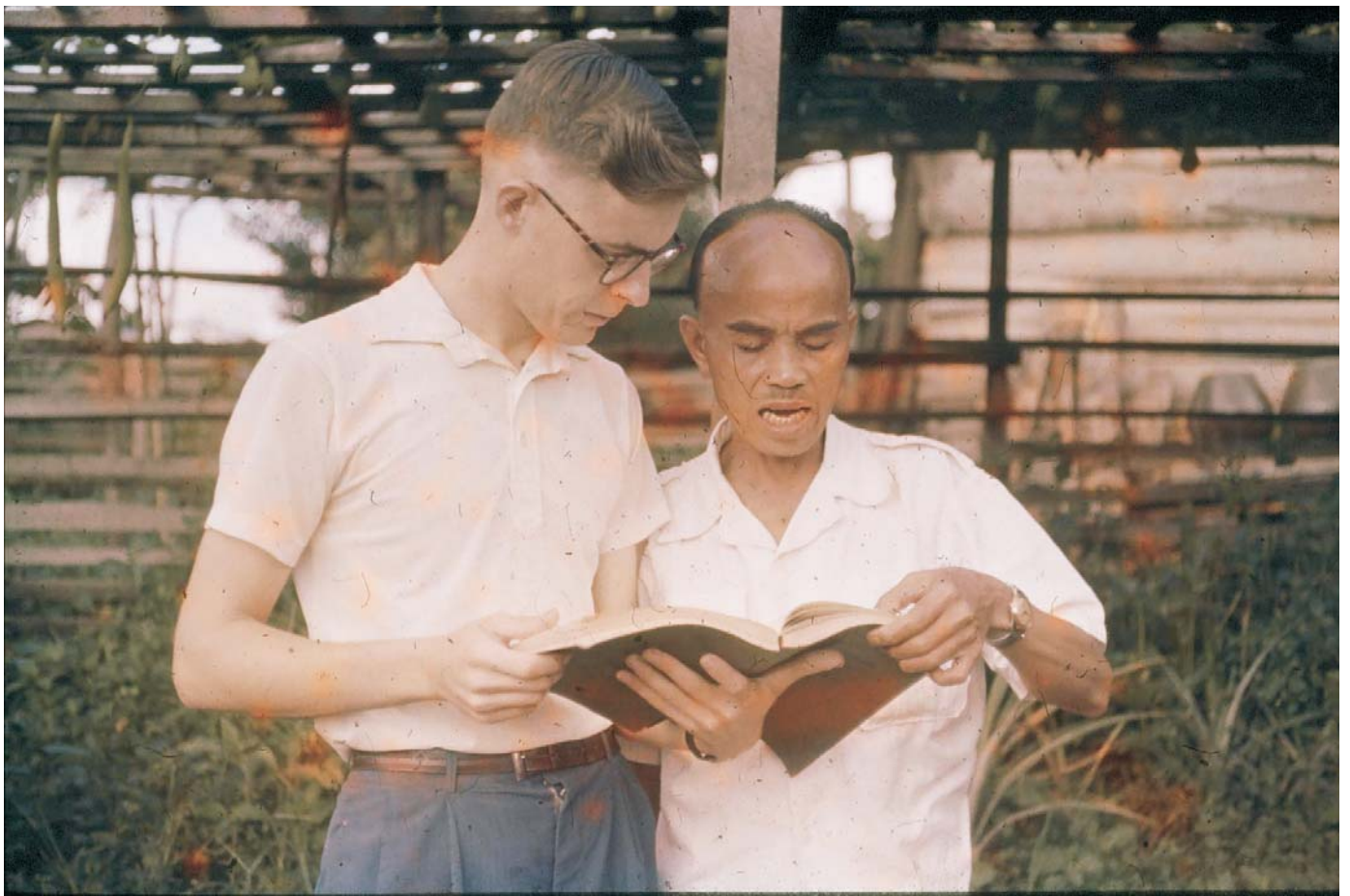


The Vietnamese New Year coincided with the Chinese New Year, according to the lunar calendar. At that time people would visit the calligrapher on the main street. He would paint charms in Chinese characters which could be fixed by the front door to bring good luck or keep malevolent spirits out of the house.

We were there with the intention of translating the Bible. For that we had to learn the Tho language. There were no books to help us. We had no help with the grammar. Like Vietnamese, there were no plurals, no tenses. Also like Vietnamese, it was tonal. There were six tones, similar but not quite the same as the Vietnamese ones. The words for yes and no were distinguished solely by tone.

mí no
mì yes

With the help of an older man (who sometimes could have fixed ideas) we started to translate Mark's Gospel.



Some fell on rocky
places, where it did not
have much soil.

Mark 4:5

It was easy to translate some passages because the topic fell within their own experience. They knew that the rocky places in the parable of the sower were not gravelly patches, but places with a huge boulder under the ground, leaving little depth of soil. The sun quickly warmed it, so the seed germinated quickly, but with no depth of soil it died.

John . . . ate locusts and
wild honey.

Mark 1:6

This one proved trickier. We had found the Tho word for ‘grasshopper’, but how could we get the word for ‘locust’? Then we remembered that grasshoppers have long antennae, locusts have short. With that settled, it seemed that our helper might think it strange that John the Baptist should have such a peculiar diet. ‘Some do eat them,’ we said tentatively. The reply was, ‘Oh, they're delicious!’

John came . . .
confessing their sins,
they were baptised by
him in the River Jordan.

Mark 1:4–5

In order to get an idiomatic translation, we explained a passage to Minh and got him to tell it back in his own words. Here is how it came out. ‘John told the people to say what bad things they had done. And if anyone would not say what bad things he had done, John took him and ducked him under the water until he would.’



Jean found a Tho woman who was willing to teach her the language. Here she is wearing the traditional Tho dress which she had brought with her when she came to South Vietnam.

Colin found a younger man to help with the translation of Mark's Gospel. Some passages really sounded, as far as we could tell, like good Tho.



Ca lăng năy? Cầm táng á?
Thing what this? Word new eh?

P'ò năy mưn au quyền mà cạ;
Mr this he take power and command;

p'i cáy khùng thành mưn vớ!
spirit chicken also obey him y'know!

Mark 1:27

‘What is this? A new message? This man speaks with authority. Even the chicken spirit obeys him!’

This was spoken about Jesus in the synagogue. Why chicken spirit? The Tho spoke of various types of spirits. The neighbourhood spirit has already been mentioned (p. 22). When a spirit entered into a person and took possession of them, they said it was a chicken spirit.



There was a health worker operating not far away. He was trained to a level between a nurse and a doctor. He would come in and give free treatment to the people if they wanted it. Very often they did not want it, however.



One day at a house nearby sticks were being burned while a Tho priest made an incantation/
A child in the house was ill. Later a priest sat in front of trays of offerings to pray to the
spirits.





The priest had two blocks of wood, rounded on one side. While he chanted, he threw these into the basket. If they fell three times the same way (both round side down, both flat side down or one each) he knew the spirit had heard him.

The sacrifices were rice, chicken blood, rice wine, incense, flags, paper money (paper with silver or gold foil).

The child had meningitis. We offered antibiotics, but it was too late. The child died.

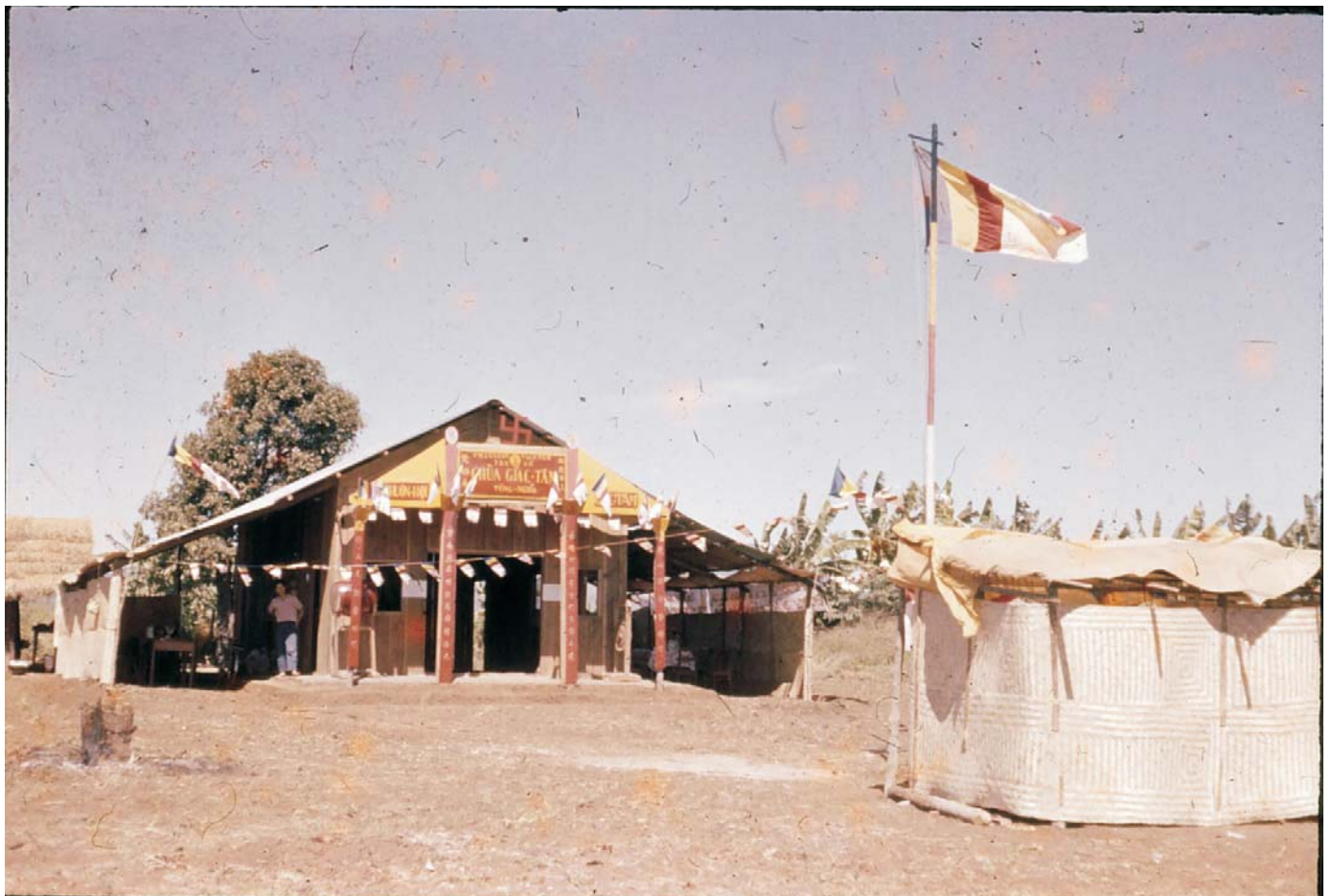
The people were very religious. But they were not Christians.





There was an evangelical church in the village with a Vietnamese pastor. Only Black Thai attended. There was also a French Catholic priest with whom I would converse in Vietnamese, the only language we had in common, to the great amusement of onlookers.

A Buddhist temple was erected in a tent just outside the village.





The priest showed me round. 'But,' he said, 'No one comes!' So they weren't really Buddhists either. Their religion was to worship the spirits of their ancestors in their home. If you think this was a good thing, honouring their parents, think again. They saw these spirits as sometimes malevolent, needing to be placated.

At the back of our house we once saw all these paper goods, a house, a horse, paper money.





There was illness in the family. They had been told that the spirit of a relative was saying that he had not been buried with due honours. So they were going to considerable expense holding a 'dry' funeral, i.e. a funeral without a body. The splendidly dressed personage here was perhaps the Tho high priest. The boys and the woman are wearing tokens of mourning. Everyone proceeded down to the river.





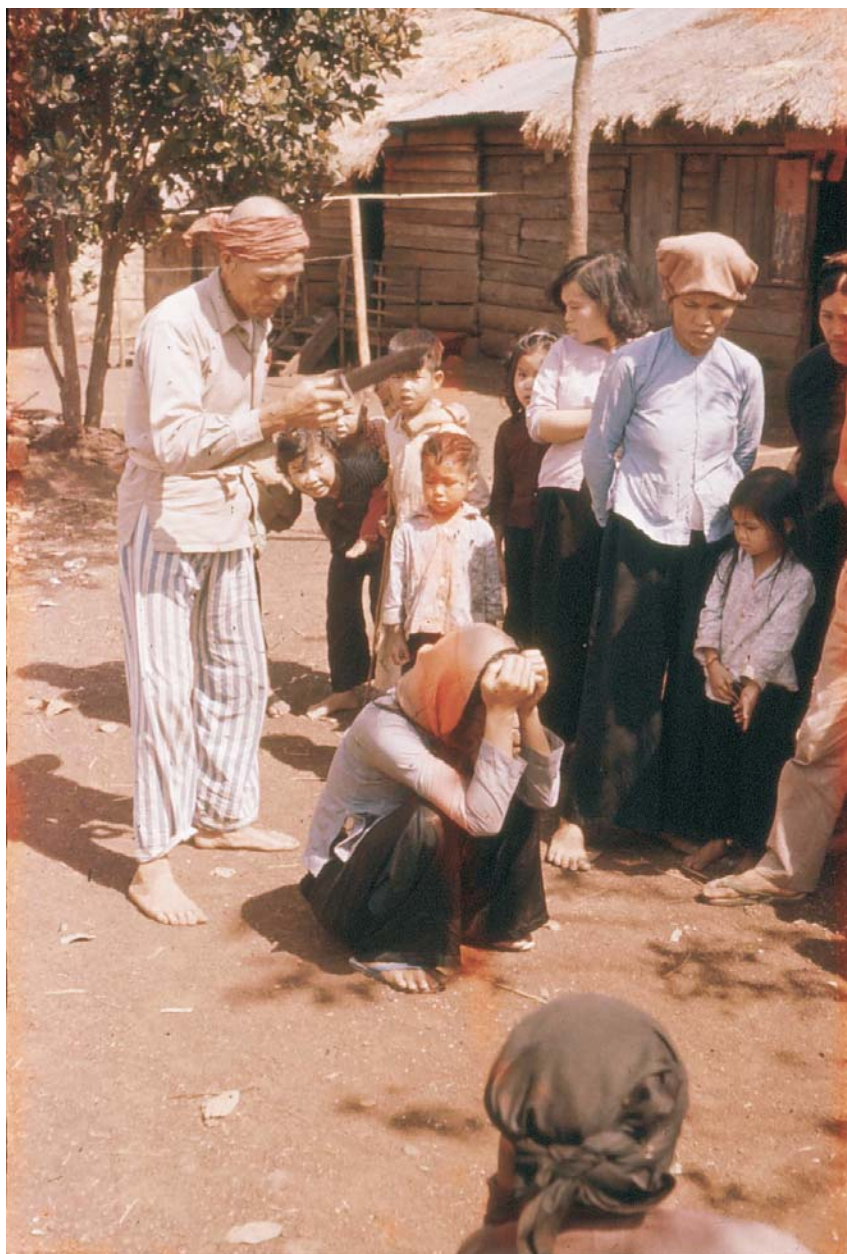
After a ceremony was performed on the river bank, the paper artefacts were burned, sending them into the spirit world for the use of the dead ancestor.





Remaining scraps were fed into the fire, and any piece left floated down the river.

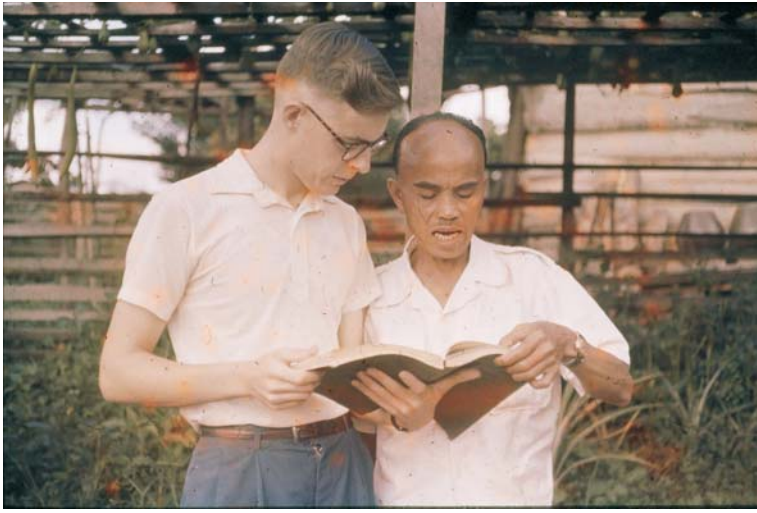




Another time, an incident occurred down our street. A woman had come from another street to invite people to a wedding. Then she suddenly changed. She was very rich, she said, when everyone knew she was as poor as they were. She had a three-storey house, she said, when everyone knew she lived in a shack like theirs. She demanded that they bring her a blouse, and when it came she threw it away as not good enough. She became so violent that they had to put a chopstick between her teeth lest she bite her tongue out.

They called for the Tho priest (seen here) who chanted over her. At length she leapt to her feet and set off running. Then she fell limp and was herself again. The evil spirit had come out of her. But everyone said, 'It will now be easier for her to be possessed another time.'

We realised that this is just what Jesus said. When an evil spirit is cast out of a person and the house is left empty, that spirit comes back into possession, bringing seven others worse than himself. What these people needed was not to be taught mere morality, not to be persuaded merely to go to church, not just to read the Bible in their own language. Though these things had their value, their real need was that the house should not be left empty. They needed Jesus to come into their hearts, which is how the Bible defines a true Christian.



This is what we wanted for all those we had come to know, for young and old, for those who had helped us, for those who had accepted us. But we didn't see it. We had to leave and we couldn't return. We wanted to see . . .



Life in a Vietnamese village.