

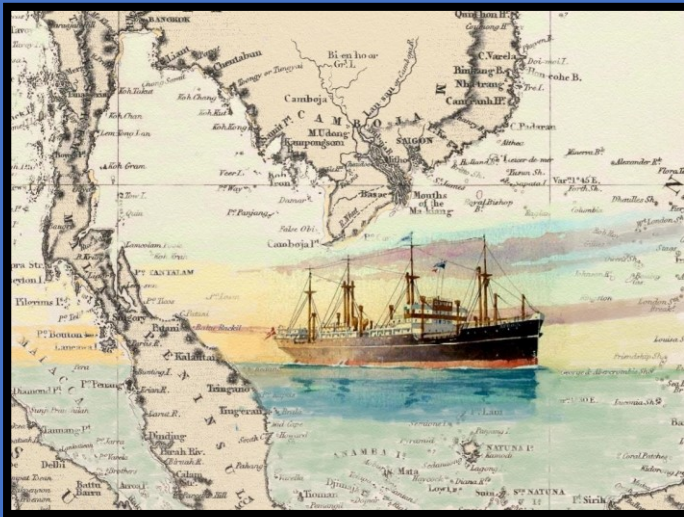
# Echoes of the Chao Phraya

(Extracts from the Vaults of Nostalgia)

By Geoff Walker



The **Gulf of Thailand**, also known as the **Gulf of Siam**, is a shallow inlet in the southwestern part of the South China Sea, bounded between the southwestern shores of the Indochinese Peninsula and the northern half of the Malay Peninsula.



The Chao Phraya River is the principal river that connects Thailand's capital City of Bangkok with the Gulf of Thailand, it is their most important arterial river. The Chao Phraya begins at the confluence of the Ping and Nan rivers at Nakhon Sawan (also called Pak Nam Pho) from which it flows south for 231 miles from the central plains to Bangkok before finally emptying into the Gulf of Thailand.

As a seafarer tramping around Asia between 1960-80s, Thailand, in particular Bangkok, always featured prominently in our scheduled ports of call. We mostly

loaded bagged rice, high grade timber, veneers, or rubber, which we carried to a variety of global destinations.

Bangkok, a Port of fascination, ranged from the hot spots of Pat Pong or Klong Toei to its serenely charming Temples, Klongs and scenic beauty, but no matter wherever you ventured, you were always captivated by the appeal of its friendly people and their grace, hence the name "land of smiles".

During the 1960-70's Thailand was at the crossroads of old and new, with many old traditions remaining, yet with an element of stoicism, pending the inevitable social changes that were to become imminent. Thailand was still very much a developing country during these years. This era forms the basis of much nostalgia for the old sailor, a time long gone, but always treasured.

Often, if we were deeply laden from our trip from East and South Africa, it would be necessary to lighten ship to reduce the draught, for crossing the tidal, Bangkok River sand bar.

Koh Si Chang anchorage was frequently crowded during the 1960-70s, well before the opening of the new Port at Laem Chabang. The anchorage was just off the Island bearing the same name which lies about 8 miles offshore from the township of Sriracha, in the Chonburi Province.

Its proximity to the main shipping lanes to the Chao Phraya River coupled with good depth of water, made it a convenient anchorage for dozens of deeply laden vessels to trans-ship their cargoes to lighter barges to enable them to meet draught restrictions for their trip up the Chao Phraya River to Bangkok, or indeed just discharge into lighters for towage to Bangkok, if the oceangoing vessel was too large to make the river transit.



Similarly, outbound vessels from Bangkok Port often stopped at Koh Si Chang to top off with additional cargo once having loaded to the maximum permissible draught for the downstream crossing of the Bangkok Bar.

No sooner had the anchor been deployed before the usual boatloads of females descend upon the ship. Climbing up ladders, ropes and of course the accommodation ladder if lowered. As most sailors will concur, trying to discourage them coming on board

was an exercise of futility, but it must be said stopping their intrusion was often more of a gesture, rather than an earnest attempt.

Numerous Barges arrived at the ship, hipped up alongside, to deposit or receive their cargoes. The stevedore labor worked tirelessly, so generally periods spent at the anchorage was relatively brief, seldom more than a day or two at the most. Bulk cargoes such as grains, were discharged into lighters by using floating grain elevators, which sucked the cargo from ship's hold, depositing it directly into the attending lighters, or other commodities such as heavy steel products discharged using ship's gear. The Anchorage was always a hive of activity and excitement.



For those ships bound for Bangkok, having reduced their draft at Koh Si Chang, they would then move the few miles to the Bangkok Bar anchorage to await the tide and Bangkok River Pilot. This was a pillar lighthouse located about 10 miles south of the river entrance. The structure has since been developed over the years and is now a substantial multi story complex. Thai pilots were excellent, all highly educated and trained (most being graduates of the Royal Thai Navy Academy).

Once having entered the river mouth, passage up the Chao Phraya was a twisting and meandering affair, the muddy brown waters rushed downstream at a high rate of knots. Frequent rafts of Hyacinth

weed came floating down with the river flow. The river progressively narrowed as one progressed upstream, but still maintaining a decent width right up to Bangkok. The riverbanks were strewn with numerous Klongs, Temples (Wats) and riverside villages, with a scattering of traditional Thai homesteads. Often Mahouts could be seen washing their Elephants in the water close to the riverbank. The main form of river transport was by narrow “Long Tail” water taxis, which darted every which way, at high speed. The passengers always waving as they sped by the ship.



(Unknown photographer)

The numerous hovel-like stilted villages, skirting along the riverbank, intermingled with Buddhist temples and shrines, painted a picture of a deeply cultured, yet needy society, nevertheless, possessing an inner happiness in their daily life and being.

A typical Long Tail boat, speeding between destinations. Sometimes these boats flew a colored flag to signify the areas to which they operated.

Most of the temples were very ornate, distinctive, and beautifully painted, often with effigies of gilded Buddhas. The entire river, although busy, always exuded an air of peace, tranquility, in a soothing environmental setting, especially during the morning hours when long tail boats filled with Monks in their saffron robes, passed by, on their way to the various townships along the riverbank. The image above depicts a typical “Long Tail” boat captioned in a reach of the Chao Phraya River, with a Buddhist Temple of Wat Arun in the background, and saffron robed Monks as passengers. The Temple of Dawn (Wat Arun Ratchawaram Ratchawaramahawihan) is situated on the West bank of the river a short boat ride upstream from Klong Toei.



(Credit: Christoph95)

Air-pollution causing a rather hazy aerial caption of the Chao Phraya River delta, at Samutprakarn.

The Phrachulachomklao Naval Dockyard (aka



PPC) is located on the west bank of the Chao Phraya River, 2 kilometers from the river mouth, and 8 kilometers from the Naval Academy, at Pak Nam.

PPC Naval Dockyard viewed from asbove The Dockyard was not built until 1981.

(Unknown Photographer)



The first stop was at “Pak Nam” immigration anchorage, at Samutprakarn, adorned with its colonial government building and immaculate Royal Thai Navy College, close to hand. Here the Port officials boarded the ship, obtaining pratique could take up to 2-3 hours. Once clearance had been granted, ships proceeded upstream towards the “Klong Toei” port area.



The large water Lizards that called the swamps around the banks of the river home, could be seen from time to time laying on the rafts of water Hyacinths in shady nooks, that lined their natural habitat along the riverbanks and Klongs. These could grow up to 1.5m in length and whilst claimed as harmless to humans, their appearance was nevertheless primeval.

(Unknown photographer)

The famous Lumpini Park in central Bangkok was also a well-known habitat for these goanna type reptiles that roamed freely. I once recall seeing one in the garden water feature, when staying at a downtown Bangkok Hotel. They also lived in the city’s drainage and sewage system, along with rats, the size of Cats.



(Unknown photographer)

A relatively recent image of Pak Nam Reach, where the Immigration Station remains (first white building set back from the semi-circular knuckle). The tower structure and overhead rail system did not exist prior to 2000s.

There were various privately owned wharves along the river operated mainly by rice exporters. If rice was the cargo to be loaded, those mill jetties would frequently be utilized. It must be said that not all were maintained in the best

standards. They were mostly of wooden construction, old, and could be very rickety. Often these wharves were quite short, consisting of a short “T” jetty configuration which called for ships to warp along the quay to load their various hatches. River buoys were placed both up and down stream of the wharf to assist ships with the process. If loading rice at the Klong Toei buoys, large barges were used to transport rice upstream from these rice mills, but no matter where rice was loaded it was a highly labor-intensive affair, since each bag was stowed individually, by hand, to form a perfect stow. Wooden ventilation channels were also an integral part of the loading process, being laid every few tiers, or so, throughout the parcel of cargo. Rush matting also being used in quantity, to prevent rice bags contacting the ship’s steel work.

During the 1960-80s Klong Toei was the main port area for Bangkok. If lucky the ship would be allocated a berth at the Klong Toei wharf complex, which consisted of about a dozen jetties. The alternative was to be moored opposite, at the mid-stream working buoys. The Klong Toei Port area lies approximately 25 miles upstream from the river delta, so allowing for port clearances at Pak Nam, transit time from the bar pilot to Klong Toei berth would usually be in the region of 4 hours.



A panoramic view of the Bangkok Port during the 1960-70s, showing the Klong Toei wharves (on the right), and mid – stream working buoys. As can be seen, the Klong Toei Reach is quite wide, allowing ships to swing in the stream. Note the skyline is void of any tall buildings, unlike the Bangkok of today.

(Unknown photographer)

Even before stevedores were on board, ships were invaded by “sew sew” girls. Although many did fulfil the laundry, sewing and ironing functions, it must be said the majority had other forms of services in mind. Payment was usually made in packs of American cigarettes or bars of scented toilet soap, since these items, were highly sought by locals and could be sold by the girls for a premium, during those times. There is no need to expand on this as most sailors will well recall the situation.

The port area of Klong Toei, is a story on its own, and was the main night entertainment area in dockside Bangkok for visiting sailors. So, many sailors who called at Bangkok regularly, established “squatters rights” at the bars, so to speak. Hence, it maintained its hidden secrets, which were mainly directed to the seagoing types who visited the port.

Klong Toei nightlife did not come alive until after 9pm when it erupted, going non-stop until around 5am. At the heart of the night entertainment area was the dingy, infamous, Mosquito Bar and the next door, Venus Room, located right outside the dock gate. They were notorious and the “headquarters of insanity” when it came to nightlife, both were absolute dens-of-iniquity. This all ended abruptly, during the mid - 1980s when finally, the local Port Authority bulldozed the premises to make way for new construction to take place (so they claimed), but the lot lay vacant for some years thereafter.

In complete contrast, the “Mariners Club” was situated only a stone’s throw away, down an adjacent Soi (lane), where it still survives. It was a standard Mariners Club, featuring the usual bar, restaurant, and outdoor swimming pool, open from about 10 am to 10 pm. It was an oasis of tranquility away from the rowdiness of neighboring venues. In the main it acted as a post office and hangout for those off watch during daytime hours and the occasional discrete lady on day shift, always eager to chat in exchange for a drink or meal.

Thailand, and especially Bangkok, has certainly had some ‘eras’ in the past that people nostalgically and whimsically recall as ‘special’. Bangkok was by no means all sordid and disreputable, once away from the shabby or sleazy establishments, one encountered a highly cultured and refined people. There can be nothing more elegant than traditional Thai dancing, or Thai ladies dressed in absolutely stunning silk woven sarongs.

The 1960s will be remembered for few big buildings, a better department stores on Silom road and good shopping at a multitude of small family shops and stalls. It provided an abundance of excellent seafood and Thai eateries, covering all levels of dining, at the most competitive prices. The Bangkok skyline only changed in February 1970 with the construction of the Dusit Thani Hotel, near Silom, at that time becoming Bangkok's tallest structure.

The takeover of motorcycles had yet to eventuate, the main form of transport remained the pedal "Samlors", or a motorcycle version "Tuk Tuk", for those who could afford it.

This was all before Thailand was beginning to be molded as a tourist destination in the 1970-80s. Bangkok had yet to be spoiled by the influx of American GIs on leave from the Vietnam War, but by the mid-late 1960s, the motorcycle had become within financial reach of many locals and began to assume the role of the sole means of family transport, adding to the already prevailing pollution and



road congestion, the heavy traffic making getting around in Bangkok something of a nightmare, and forever remembered. The Asoke Junction was most definitely the "Intersection from Hell", an absolute traffic horror and 24/7 death trap. The caption shown above left, demonstrates just how family transport was taken to the extreme! All aspects of safety discarded in the interests of mobility.

(Unknown photographer)

Bangkok had its share of top - class hotels, perhaps the most prominent in the 1960s was the Oriental and the Eriwan, for example (followed by the Dusit Thani Hotel in 1979). The Oriental Hotel has a history dating back to the middle of the 19th century, when Thailand was still known as Siam, and started as a rest house for foreign seafarers. Hence, it was established on the banks of the Chao Phraya River. It was to become one of the world's greatest hotels. The Oriental is now known as the "Mandarin Oriental". Whilst the Eriwan Hotel was much more modern, still retained its classic Thai architecture, was only built in 1956 yet demolished in 1987. It became a Bangkok landmark standing at the corner of Rajaprasong intersection. A new high-rise hotel, known as the Grand Hyatt Eriwan Hotel, now occupies the site. Visitors will recall the iconic shrine of the "Four Faced Buddha" close to the Hotel, which was also constructed in 1956, at the recommendation of an astrologer to counter the negative influences associated with the building of the Eriwan Hotel.





Floating Markets were also a feature of any trip up the Chao Phraya to Bangkok. By taking a long-tail boat ride, which cost only a few Baht, from Klong Toei, one could easily visit one of the many floating markets that existed in virtually any of the numerous Klongs (canals), that adjoined the river. You would soon find yourself surrounded by market stalls, selling everything from souvenirs, artifacts, and trinkets to locally harvested tropical fruit and vegetables, flowers (especially Orchids), etc. Many interesting hours could

be spent wandering around such venues which were a favorite amongst those crew members that enjoyed taking photographs or were looking to buy the almost mandatory, silks, intricate wooden carvings of elephants or Buddhas as gifts for those at home. (Unknown photographer)



Ships transiting the Chao Phraya River seldom slowed down when passing the stilted villages dispersed at regular intervals along the riverbanks, for fear that the ships wash could damage their rickety foundations. However, most had already stood the tests of time, because seldom did river Pilots wish to slow down, claiming that the structures were illegal, and in any event, the stilts were piled very deep and were much stronger than they appeared.

(Unknown photographer)



(Painting by Tony Westmore from Author's collection)

The old Panamanian freighter "San Fernando" loading bagged rice – mid-stream, Bangkok, ca 1958. A common site in the Chao Phraya River around that era.

A passage along the Chao Phraya River today will hold few similarities compared to the 1960-70s and indeed the 1980s. I think the only remaining feature is the color of the river water, rafts of floating Hyacinth weed, the “put put” sound of the longtail boats and odors drifting off the swampy riverbanks. In most cases, these few factors alone are often enough to stoke nostalgic memories of a time long-gone, but treasured, by many who were fortunate enough to have experienced those golden years.

End

References: Various Thailand archives and online data available in the Public Domain from which additional material has been sourced.

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