

A hike through the 'Golden

THE Golden Triangle: a remote, mountainous region where Thailand, Burma, and Laos meet; golden because until the mid-1970s it was the world's largest source of raw opium. Through this area I decided to take a three-day hike to enjoy the scenery and get a close look at the tribesmen who continue to cultivate the crop.

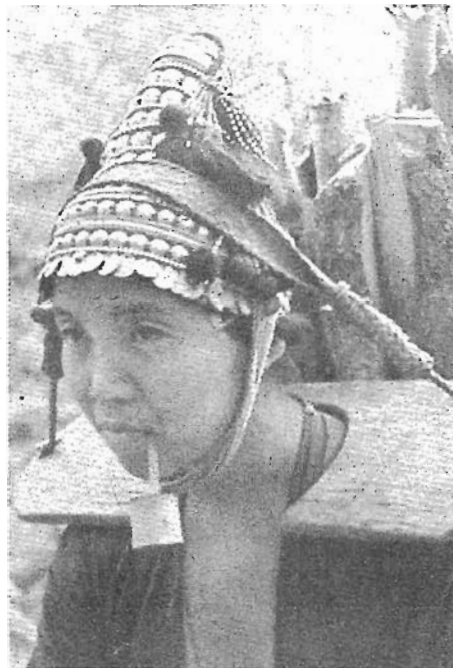
I was travelling with my friend John, who, like me, was teaching English to Thai students at a university in Bangkok. Although it was December, the temperature in the city still hovered around 90°F. in the afternoon. We were determined to head north for the cooler climate.

Tour buses leave Bangkok daily for the overnight ride to Chiang Mai, Thailand's second largest city and a popular vacation spot for Westerners and Thais alike. One of Chiang Mai's attractions is its night bazaar, a maize of stalls spilling over with trinkets and local crafts. Hand-painted umbrellas, lacquer-ware and silverware, and distinctive Thai celadon are among other items on display. I recall one stall that featured especially unusual merchandise: a variety of intricately wrought, silver opium pipes. The vendor was set apart from other sellers not only by her goods but by her appearance. She wore a black skirt and a beautifully embroidered vest. A broad silver hoop hung around her neck. Her pulled back hair exaggerated the roundness of her face and flatness of her features. She was a Meo woman, a member of one of the several ethnically and culturally distinct tribal groups scattered throughout Southeast Asia. The largest concentration of villages is found in the Golden Triangle region.

These hill tribes, as they are called, filtered down from southern China no more than a hundred years ago. In the past two decades they have been increasingly harassed by the Burmese army and the Lao and Vietnamese Communist parties, who regard them as undesirable aliens. They speak their own language, live by their own laws and customs, and isolate themselves further by inhabiting the rugged territory that marks the foothills of the Himalayas. Although basically shy people, the

Triangle'

—by—
PHILIP WITTE



An Akha woman humps a heavy load as she trudges through the "Golden Triangle."

villagers occasionally venture into town to supplement their incomes as farmers.

Opium had been the chief cash crop until an international crackdown forced many farmers to diversify into other crops, mainly corn, garlic, coffee, and vegetables. Under the sponsorship of King Bhumipol, the Thai Government has established projects to teach them new agricultural techniques to replace the slash and burn method that had been depleting the soil. Still, small fields of poppies, hidden in the midst of tall corn stalks, can be found. Border police look the other way if the opium is for private consumption; but many farmers find it difficult to refuse the US\$1600 payoff for a kilo of raw opium, up from a mere US\$40 fifteen years ago.

From an agent in Chiang Mai who specialised in trips to the Golden Triangle, John and I booked a three-day trek through northern Thailand with stops at hill tribe villages. All

together, there would be ten people on the trip: a young man from Texas who had not seen home in five years, his English girlfriend, a Merchant Marine from Liverpool, a coal miner from Birmingham, two Malaysian students, a middle-aged Swiss couple who were the only experienced hikers on the trip, John and myself. We also had along our own Thai cook, which was just as well since I knew black dog is considered a delicacy in this area of the world. Mun, our guide, was a college student who majored in English at Chiang Mai University. His main job, as group leader, was to prevent members of the tour from getting lost, which easily could occur if one should fall behind on an unmarked trail. The complete cost of the journey, including food, transportation, and primitive shelter at the villages, amounted to US\$20.

We left Chiang Mai for a three-hour ride north by pickup truck. The terrain became increasingly mountainous along the way. We clambered out of the back of the pickup for a stretch, then switched to a motorised long boat for a restful ride along a narrow waterway. Our first real hiking was a two-hour trek through the beautiful countryside near Burma. I felt a sense of serenity as I walked along the winding footpaths raised above the muddy rice paddies, where farmers in palm frond hats manoeuvred their lumbering water buffaloes.

The first village we came to belonged to the Meo tribe. The villagers were undisturbed by us, probably because they had grown used to uninvited visitors tramping through their out-of-the-way although not inaccessible settlement. Two dirty-faced boys stared at us with mild curiosity. A girl of about seven cradled her younger brother in her arms. A group of teenaged boys amused themselves by playing a violent game with homemade tops, the object of which was to smash one's opponent's top off the dirt playing field. *Whoops* accompanied each whip of the top. A woman was engaged in weaving, and her husband, who had little to do between the planting and harvesting seasons, ▶

observed the scene with amused detachment. In sum, there was a lot of activity in the village, but not a great deal of work being done.

The exposure to Westerners in recent years has created an interest in money, mainly small change, which formerly these people had no use for other than as ornamentation for women's headdresses. They now demand one baht (US five cents) for each photograph, although candy is an acceptable medium of exchange. The prices the women asked for their embroidery was higher than the prices charged by stores in either Chiang Mai or Bangkok. It was time to move on.

Over a few hills, through a field of grass that grew several feet over heads, and the group reached a Lahu village. The Lahu have a reputation for being skilful hunters, and while old carbines are available, many Lahu men still use crossbows and poisoned arrows. Agricultural methods are primitive. We saw a teenaged girl pounding rice by stepping on one end of a seesaw device that lifted a weight which dropped on the grain when she stepped off. The scene could have been taken from China 4,000 years ago. An enormous swaybacked pig, whose stomach reached the ground, stood watching us like an ugly watch dog. This village was dirty and its residents not overjoyed to see us; I was, therefore, relieved to learn from Mun that we would not be staying overnight, but at a Lisu village, one of seven in the Thai corner of the Golden Triangle.

My leg muscles ached by the time we reached the Lisu village, high in the rugged hillsides. Their shelters looked more sturdily constructed and better cared for than the ramshackle huts of the Meo and Lahu. Like the women of other tribes, Lisu women wear an elaborate native costume as their everyday apparel. Lisu can be distinguished by their exceptionally large turbans and their arrays of silver bangles. The Lisu hill tribe continues to cultivate opium poppies, although spotter planes have cut down the number and size of fields the farmers can plant.

Everyone on the trek set down their packs, took off their walking shoes, and sat down for a good Thai meal of vegetable omelette, rice, pork, and chicken curry. Mun had made arrangements with the village headman, so we were expected guests.



There was a comfortable, homey feel to the place as we ate our dinner outdoors while the Lisu women were preparing supper for their families. Children peered around the corner of a hut to get a better view of us but darted away whenever one of us looked their way. By the time we finished eating it was dark and the clear sky was filled with stars. The shifted constellations reminded me how far away I was from home.

I thought the group soon would break up and get some sleep for an early start the next day but, to our delight, the village children arranged some entertainment for us. With the thatched roof huts as a backdrop, six barefoot boys and girls performed native dances on a dirt stage. An older boy played a *pin*, a kind of simple banjo, and the children followed behind him, mimicking his simple yet graceful steps. We smiled and applauded, hoping they would

A generation of one family of the Akha tribe ... the most primitive and most superstitious hill tribe.



understand these signs of approval. Groggy with sleep, the children drifted back to their huts.

When the festivities seemed over, Mun made an announcement: "Anyone who wants to smoke opium, come with me." Everyone followed. Some wanted to watch; others were quite eager to try.

Out of doors again, I asked Mun about the use of the drug by the villagers themselves.

"Mainly it is the old men who

smoke it," he replied. "They must work in the fields all day, and that is hard for them. Some of them smoke ten bowls a day: three in the morning, three more during their rest in the afternoon, and maybe four at night to help them sleep."

"How is the opium sent down to Bangkok?"

"By mule if there are big bundles, or else men carry it on their backs if there is not so much. Sometimes it is given to children who later hand

it over to someone else."

"What would happen if I should stumble across some opium traders making a connection?"

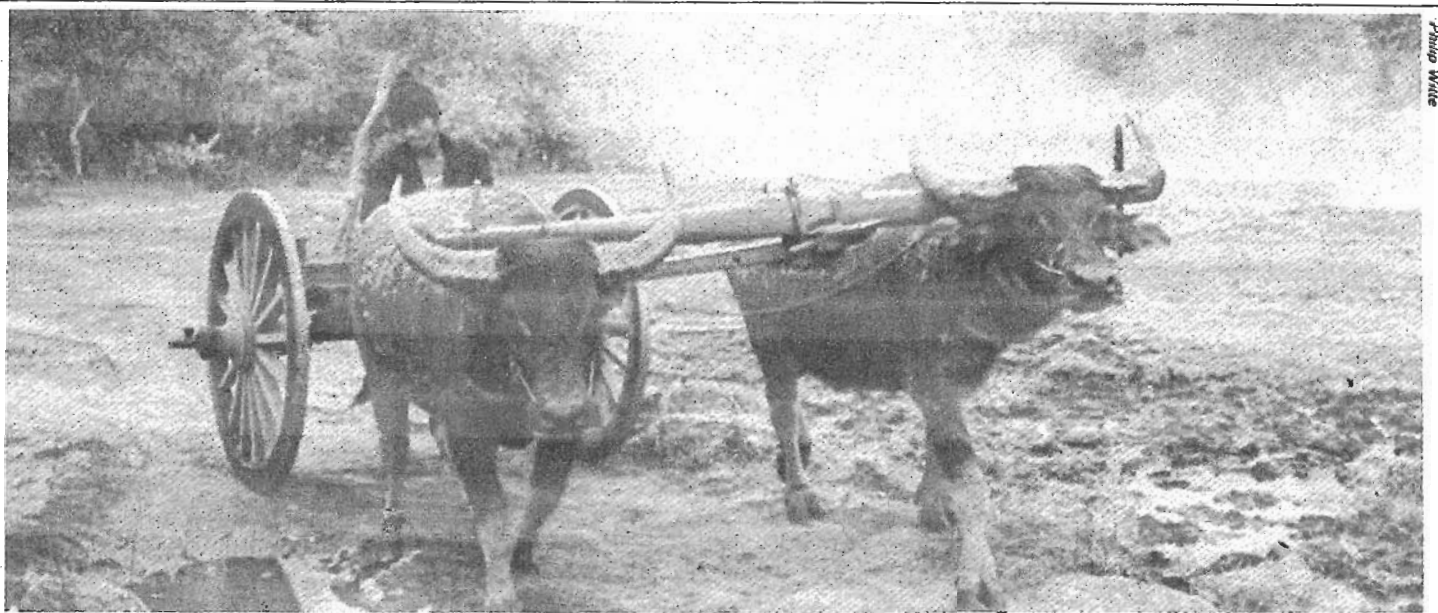
"Then you must die." Mun gave a slight smile which I recognised was not an indication that he was amused, but a sign that the conversation was making him feel uncomfortable.

A group of young village women were huddled around a dying camp fire, chanting a soft and sad refrain broken from time to time by a singer who took up a solo. "They are single girls who think about their future husbands," explained Mun. Closer to us, several young men also were singing softly into the night. I asked Mun if they were replying in song to the women. He answered that they were describing their work in the field. It was a peaceful scene being with these simple tribal people in their remote village.

I found my way to our shelter for the night: a long, windowless room with wooden platforms to sleep on. There were no mattresses, but blankets and pillows were provided. The night air was chilly, and several members of our party huddled next to each other for warmth. I found my pillow and a place to lie down, wrapped myself up in a blanket, and fell into a slumber to the slow, rhythmic breathing of people in deep sleep.

The next morning, we started off on a six-kilometre hike to an Akha village. The path rose steadily until we reached a level area where we took a rest. Steam from a hot spring floated around us and gave a magical quality to the pristine landscape. Mun explained that villagers wash in the hot springs for their supposed curative powers.

By noon, we arrived at the "Pacification Office," otherwise known as the border police station. The Thai policemen must have been out to lunch when we were *attacked*, or so it seemed, by two Akha women wielding strings of bead necklaces and bracelets. These short but sturdy women had been hiding in the bush beside the road, and when our party approached they tried to lasso us with their wares: necklace, ten cents; bracelet, five cents; wooden pipe packed with unidentified herb, ten cents. They were aggressive but good-natured women who appeared



Steam from a hot spring creates a misty backdrop for an oxen crossing in the "Golden Triangle."

to be about fifty-years-old and who stood no taller than four feet, ten inches.

The women, later joined by an adolescent girl, were the first Akha we had come across. They wore the most elaborate headdresses we had seen, made of concentric circles of silver with tassels sewed on top and silver coins dangling across their brow. They had on black vests, surprisingly short skirts, and leggings extending from knee to ankle.

The Akha prefer to live at high altitudes. A visit to their village meant climbing up a steep mountain along the Thai-Burmese border. Mick took one look at the mountain trail and decided to wait for us at the bottom. The climb was the roughest part of our trek. We had to hang onto trees to prevent us from sliding down. The fertile valley became more distant, the panorama more inclusive. Trudging behind us and soon passing us was a middle-aged, barefooted, pipe-smoking Akha woman with what must have been forty pounds of firewood in a basket strapped across her head. As we looked on, breathless and amazed, a young boy scrambled happily behind her. If a child of five could do it, perhaps we could, too.

We made it to the top. Just below us lay the Akha village. The woman bearing the wood already had set down her load, but another woman with large bamboo tubes on her back was heading down the mountain to fetch water in the valley below. One of the disadvantages to living where there is a view is living without running water.

Anyone who enters or leaves the village must pass through the sacred gate. We were careful when entering the village because, if we were to touch this gate by accident, we would have had to present the elders with a chicken, which we were not in a position to do. I knew that the Akha were the most primitive and most superstitious hill tribe. They are animists, finding spirits in the clouds and in dead tree stumps. They placate the gods with food offerings set on sticks.

Demons lurk everywhere

We passed one of these little altars in a field on our way from the police station. Demons lurk everywhere, waiting to cause injury to the unwary and bring an epidemic or natural disaster upon a village. Should twins be born to an Akha woman, one is thought to be the ghost of the other. As a precaution, both babies are strangled, the house they were born in burned to the ground, and the parents cast out of the village to fend for themselves.

The village was filthy. Grey swine, looking more like wild boars without tusks, trod about; chickens pecked for grain wherever it happened to lie; and black dogs, irritable perhaps at the prospect of becoming a meal, snarled at us from beneath every hut. The Akha are not the friendliest

of people. Understandably, they regarded this influx of white people into their mountain settlement as an invasion of their privacy. The older women were willing to hold up their grandchildren for photographs in return for candy, coins, or trinkets. One man, his head shaved except for a knot of hair in the back, actually posed for photographs, striking a proud stance while smoking his foot-long pipe.

Mun pointed out a hut raised on stilts about six feet off the ground. "When a couple want to get married, they climb a ladder into that room. They stay together at night. In the morning, the father of the woman shoots a gun into the air. Then they are married. If a man from another tribe wants to marry an Akha woman, he must pay her father US\$100 [in cash, precious metal, or livestock.] A Lisu woman costs US\$300." My Thai friends in Bangkok view the hill tribe people as immoral because some tribes engage in premarital sex. A wealthy headman often has two wives and is expected to maintain two households, although some rural and Muslim Thais also practise polygamy.

As we were heading out toward the sacred gate, a group of children were chasing a squealing piglet under huts and across the open ground. We lingered at the edge of the village to await the outcome of the chase. One boy leaped forward and grabbed the little animal by its hind legs. Holding it upside down, the boy and his joyful companions proudly brought their prize before the

village's spirit doctor, a meek looking man who seemed unlikely to possess strong magical powers. This Akha shaman removed a sharp probe from a case, poked the wriggling creature a few times, then spat a copious quantity of tobacco juice onto the piglet's hind quarters. The magic accomplished, we left the village with the comforting knowledge that the spiritual forces of good and evil were once again in balance and that the Akha tribe will continue the same pattern of life they have followed for generations.

Back in the Lisu village, the group of us celebrated our second and final night of hiking through the highlands by jointly consuming enough mekong whisky to stagger a Thai elephant. Tex led a singalong of American folk and pop songs while Mun accompanied him on the harmonica. Rod spoke sentimentally of his boyhood in Rhodesia. Mick regaled us with stories of his adventures in the Merchant Marine, all of which occurred during shore leave. We made a lot of noise, but the neighbours did not complain. Our beds were as hard as they had been the night before, although we did not seem to mind so much.

In the morning, we marched to the pickup point, stopping for lunch at a White Karen village. The Karen are an endogamous and matrilineal tribe of Tribeto Burmese origin found in western Thailand. Converts to Christianity among the villagers attest to the work of missionaries, who have diluted their culture by altering their view of the world. We ate at the Karen Coffee Shop, a landmark diner for weary Western travellers. Its bulletin board was covered with hand-drawn maps marking hill tribe villages and travel tips such as "Westerners unwelcome at this village" and "You can sleep safely here." Fortified by a plate of chicken fried rice, we walked another few kilometres to a waiting truck already filling up with local residents. Three of us ended up on the roof, holding on tightly as the little pickup negotiated deep holes in the dirt road.

In a matter of hours, we were back in civilisation — more precisely in Mun's dormitory room where I took my first shower in three days. John and I thanked our young tour guide, and I promised to send him a group photo. Soon we would be back in Bangkok. ■