

WE REMEMBER BERT

by

Pue Rochanapuranda

Herbert Girton Deignan passed away on March 15, 1968.

We in Thailand who knew him miss him a great deal, because he was a great friend and a true friend of Thailand.

It is most fitting that we call Herbert G. Deignan—Bert, because Bert loved birds. He was an ornithologist and contributed much in this field throughout his life.

Bert was born in the United States in 1906 and was educated at Princeton University where he graduated with his Bachelor's degree in 1928.

He was first fascinated with Thailand through a film on "*Chang The Elephant Boy*". He was overwhelmed with the natural beauties and wilderness of the country in those days.

After his graduation from Princeton Bert came to Thailand and went to Chiangmai, a province in the Northern part of the country, to become a teacher in English at Prince Royal's College. Chiangmai is now a tourist attraction. It abounds with natural charm and beauties, old traditions, and culture. At the same time it has all modern facilities. People there are hospitable and the girls there are the most beautiful in the country. Bert spent four full years in Chiangmai, enjoying himself teaching and at the same time collecting birds of that region.

Bert returned to the United States in 1932, and worked with the Library of Congress where he had the opportunity of using his Thai language. He had a good knowledge of Thai in reading, writing and speaking. His Thai speech had a Northern accent and he loved to speak it with his Thai friends.

Bert came back to Thailand again in 1935 and spent another two years. This time he was awarded a fellowship by the Smithsonian Institution to study and to collect Thai birds for the United States Natural History Museum. He was by then an expert in Thai ornithology. When he returned to the United States again he was put to work in the Bird Division of the United States National Museum. During his work in this position Bert had the opportunity of visiting many European countries in connection with Asian bird collections.

Bert married Dr. Stella M.A. Leche in 1938, and they lived together in Washington D.C. Although Stella is interested in another field of science, that of human anatomy and physical anthropology, they got along very well together.

During World War II Bert served in the Office of Strategic Services because of his wide knowledge in Southeast Asia. When the war started, Bert immediately contacted M.R. Seni Pramoj who was then the Thai Ambassador in Washington D.C. and who had already started the Free Thai Movement. M.R. Seni Pramoj was appointed Prime Minister of Thailand after the war, and now he is serving as the Leader of the Democrat Party, a leading opposition party of Thailand.

With the OSS during the war Bert was sent to Ceylon where with a group of Thais and Americans, they set up a camp which kept constant contact with the Free Thai Movement in Thailand which was then under Japanese occupation. It was a strange occupation because Thai troops were not disarmed and we worked together with the Japanese while the Free Thai Movement was working underground.

When Bert returned to Washington D. C. he acted as a liason between the Free Thai Embassy in Washington D. C. and the United States through the OSS.

In honor of his meritorious services Bert was awarded a Medal of Merit and the Order of the White Elephant (Fifth Class) by H.M. the King of Thailand.

Bert revisited Thailand in 1952 and remained until 1953 as a Guggenheim Fellow. Bert always loved Thailand and the Thai people and would have gladly spent his life among us had his interest in ornithology not demanded his working in the Smithsonian Institution where he had the facilities and contacts he needed to carry on in his profession. M.R. Seni Pramoj called Bert a "Yankee Thai", and this is an accurate description of him for he never lost his warm love for Thailand and her people.

Bert was invited to participate in the Ninth Pacific Science Congress held in Bangkok as a guest of honor. I was then Secretary to the Organizing Committee of the Conference. Bert also represented the Smithsonian Institution to the Tenth Pacific Science Congress in Honolulu.

After his resignation from the Smithsonian Institution in 1962 Bert and Stella went to live in France and then Switzerland. But Bert was still active in his bird business until the end of his days. Bert wrote a number of publications on birds. A list of his publications appears elsewhere in this special Bulletin. Bert was not only an authority on Thai birds, but on birds in Southeast Asian countries.

I met Bert in Thailand. I met Bert and Stella in the United States. I also met them in Switzerland. I paid them visits and sometimes stayed with them for a few days when I went either to the United States or Switzerland. I was with them when Bert had his brain operation in Lausanne. I remember how Stella was worried about him, but Bert was cheerful and in good spirits. My daughter, Prungpridi or Ead or to Bert "Lek" stayed with Bert and Stella for three years studying while the Deignans were in Washington D.C. My daughter paid them another visit while they were in Switzerland. They love my daughter as their daughter because they have no children. Bert and Stella are just like my relatives, more than mere friends.

When we lost Bert, we lost a close relative, and we lost a true friend of Thailand. The world of ornithology also lost him. However, Bert will be long remembered.

“Man comes to the world

Naked and bare,

He goes through this

With trouble and care.

When he dies,

He goes to the Lord knows where.

If he does well here,

He does well there.”