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Thailand to Close Case Of Missing American

By H. D. S. Greenway
Washington Post Foreign Service

BANGKOK, March 25—On Tuesday it will be seven years to the day since James H. W. Thompson disappeared without a trace in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia. After seven years, the courts are entitled to declare him legally dead, but the case has never been solved.

Not a single clue has proved reliable and, as one of his close friends said last week, "All the theories are improbable and some of them are ridiculous."

The life of this American expatriate was itself improbable and the facts and fantasies concerning his disappearance have become one of the more romantic and controversial mysteries of the East.

Thompson came to Bangkok right after World War II as an officer in the Office of Strategic Services, the

forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency. He decided to stay on in the East and built the weaving of silk in Thailand up from a small and dying cottage industry into a multimillion dollar business known all over the world. He was a great raconteur and entertained often in his beautiful and theatrical Thai-style house on a canal.

He became a legendary local character and during the 1950s and early 1960s an introduction to Jim Thompson was eagerly sought-after by visitors to Bangkok.

On March 26, 1967, Thompson was visiting friends in the Cameron Highlands resort in Malaysia. It was Easter Sunday and, following a picnic lunch, the house party of four returned to their cottage in the early afternoon for a nap. Thompson may have sat out on the lawn while the others dozed in their rooms, it is not certain, but shortly after 3 p.m., his friends heard



JIM THOMPSON
... missing Thai silk king

See THOMPSON, A12, Col. 1

THOMPSON, From AI

the sound of a deck chair being placed on the veranda and the sound of footsteps going down the gravel drive to the road.

It was presumed that the footsteps were Thompson's and that he was going for a stroll. But no one is sure, for Thompson was never seen or heard from again. Later his suit coat was found over the back of the deck chair and in his room were his cigarettes and some pills he took to kill the pain of gallstones.

The Cameron Highlands are well laid out for hikers with numerous footpaths, but closing in on every side are some of the most impenetrable jungles in the world. It was first assumed that Thompson had lost his way or perhaps wandered off the trail. The following morning the search began with policemen, soldiers, volunteers and even local aborigines from the forests joining in.

The woods were combed for 10 days, but nothing was found. It was then that minds began to turn toward more sinister suspicions. Might there have been foul play, perhaps a kidnaping? Myriads of mystics and local witch doctors descended on the highlands. A Dutch clairvoyant named Peter Hurkos, who had become famous for his eerie revelations during the Boston strangler murder case, showed up in the highlands and said that Thompson had been kidnaped by someone known to him, drugged and taken to Cambodia.

All Thompson's earlier OSS days were recalled as was his association with the former Thai Premier Pridi Phamomyong, leader of the anti-Japanese underground in Thailand during the war, who, when Thompson disappeared, was in exile in China. It was recalled that during the late 1940s Thompson also knew many anti-French Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians as well.

If Thompson was not kidnaped for money—and as the months went by there was no demand for ransom



By Ken Burgess—The Washington Post

Thompson was last seen in Cameron Highlands.

—perhaps he had been kidnaped for political reasons. Perhaps he had gone voluntarily on some secret mission.

Thompson was 61 when he disappeared and it had been 20 years since his cloak and dagger days. Nonetheless, the idea that he might have been involved in some high-level espionage persisted.

Early in the case, a well-known British jungle expert, Richard Noone, declared that it was most unlikely that Jim Thompson had been lost in the jungle. Noone knew the Cameron Highlands well from his experience as an anti-guerrilla fighter, and soon after Thompson's disappearance he went there to talk to the aboriginal tribes who live in the forest. Noone's position was that you just do not lose a man in the jungle, not if you know how to read the signs. If Thompson had been eaten by a tiger or fallen in a ravine, the aboriginals would have found some trace, Noone said. Yet there was nothing—no spot of blood, not even a vulture wheeling in the sky.

Later it was suggested that he had been kidnaped and murdered to cover up some dark secret in Thailand, the nature of which has never been agreed upon. The conspiracy and murder theory was given fresh impetus when, later that year, Jim Thompson's elder sister

was brutally murdered in her house in Pennsylvania.

As the years passed nothing appeared either to prove or disprove any of these theories. In recent years, the secret missing theory has date, favors the theory that can troop withdrawal from Vietnam and the Paris agreements have taken place apparently without Jim Thompson's help. But the murder theory has not abated even though no one has come up with a concrete motive.

Thompson's friend and biographer, William Warren, whose book "The Legendary American" is the most complete study of the case to date, favors the theory that Thompson was lost in the jungle as the least improbable of the many theories that have been presented. Richard Noone notwithstanding, Warren feels that the thoroughness of the search has been exaggerated, given the extreme difficulty of the terrain.

Connie Mongskau, an old friend who accompanied Thompson on his Malaysian holiday seven years ago, says that she does not believe that Jim Thompson is still alive. She leans toward the Warren theory that if Thompson is ever found it will probably be in the Cameron Highlands.

During the war, Jim Thompson had been trained to parachute into Thailand behind the Japanese lines, but the Japanese surrendered literally as Thompson's plane was in the air.

He had attended St. Paul's School and Princeton University and during the 1930s he lived a fashionable life in New York. But his brief marriage did not survive the war and he turned his back on his former life to settle in Bangkok.

His great commercial success was in organizing silk-weaving into an industry and selling the product overseas. Many Americans first noticed the beautiful textures and rich colors of Thai silk when Jim Thompson's silk was chosen for the costumes of the "King and I" in the 1950s. Although Thompson's Thai Silk Co. is still the best known, there

are scores of imitators today.

Thompson never made a company was basically Thai-owned. When he vanished, he held only 18 per cent of the shares.

His other great loves were his priceless collection of Chinese and Southeast Asian antiques and the spectacular Thai house he built great fortune out of silk. His to put them in. Thompson's famous "House on the Klong" is still open to tourists two mornings a week. When Thompson lived there, the house was not so much a museum as a dazzling and exotic theater in which to entertain.

Originally, Thompson had intended to leave the house and his collection to the Siam Society here. Several years before he disappeared he got into a row with the government's Fine Arts Department over some Buddha



Before his disappearance, an invitation to Thompson's dramatic "House on the Kloug" was widely sought after by visitors to Bangkok.

By Bill Sneed—The Washington Post

images which the Fine Arts Department said had been stolen. Thompson did not deny that some of them probably had been stolen, but took the attitude that if he bought them, at least they would be preserved in Thailand instead of being smuggled out of the country.

Thompson never forgave the Thai authorities for the incident and there were some Thais who resented

what they considered his patronizing attitude.

"Jim began collecting art before there was much interest in it here, it's true, but, whenever we disagree with him, he thinks we are ungrateful," a Thai complained a few years ago.

Shortly afterwards he changed his will leaving his estate to his nephew, Henry Thompson, a New York stock broker. The nephew has agreed that his uncle's

house should be set up as a Thai foundation to be maintained as "an art museum for the benefit and enjoyment of the people of Thailand and of visitors to it."

The petition to create the foundation will go up to the courts when Jim Thompson is declared legally dead, according to the present manager of the Thai Silk Co. Because of legal complications and the slow-moving Thai bureaucracy it is unlikely

that this will happen before the summer.

Meanwhile, the House on the Klong remains almost the way Thompson left it seven years ago. The big white cockatoo bird that used to sit on Thompson's shoulder is still alive and waits for him to talk through the door again. Although they are now in the minority, some friends still think that one day Jim Thompson will do just that.