

Seven Years After The Silk King Walked Off for Good

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Bangkok

IT IS NOW seven years 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."

Yet 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 (OSS), the forerunner of the CIA. He decided to stay on in the East and he built the weaving of silk in Thailand up from a small and dying cottage industry into a multi-million-dollar business known all over the world. He was a great raconteur and he entertained often in his beautiful and theatrical Thai-style house on a canal.

He became a legendary local "character." During the 1950s and early '60s, an introduction to Thompson was sought after by people visiting Bangkok.

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ON MARCH 26, 1967, Thompson was on holiday visiting friends in the Cameron Highlands resort area. 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.

Shortly after three, his friends heard 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. No one is sure, for Thompson was never seen or heard from again. His

suit coat later was found over the back of the deck chair. In his room were his cigarettes and some pills he took to kill the pain of galistones.

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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 aboriginals from the forest joining in.

For ten days the woods were combed, but nothing was ever found. It was then that sinister suspicions began to emerge. Might there have been foul play — perhaps a kidnaping? Dozens of mystics and local witch doctors descended on the highlands. A Dutch clairvoyant named Peter Hurkos, who had become famous for his 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.

Thompson's earlier days in the OSS were recalled, as was his association with the former Thai Prime Minister Pridi Phamnomiyong, the leader of the anti-Japanese underground in Thailand during the war who, at the time of Thompson's disappearance, was in exile and living in China. It was recalled that, during the late 1940s, Thompson had known many anti-French Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians as well.

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

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.

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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 that 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.

His other great loves were his priceless collection of Chinese and Southeast Asian antiques and the spectacular Thai house he built to put them in. Thompson's famous "House on the Klong"

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JAMES H. W. THOMPSON
Footsteps in the gravel

(canal) is still open to tourists today two mornings a week. But when Thompson lived in it the house was not so much a museum as a dazzling and exotic theater in which to entertain.

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