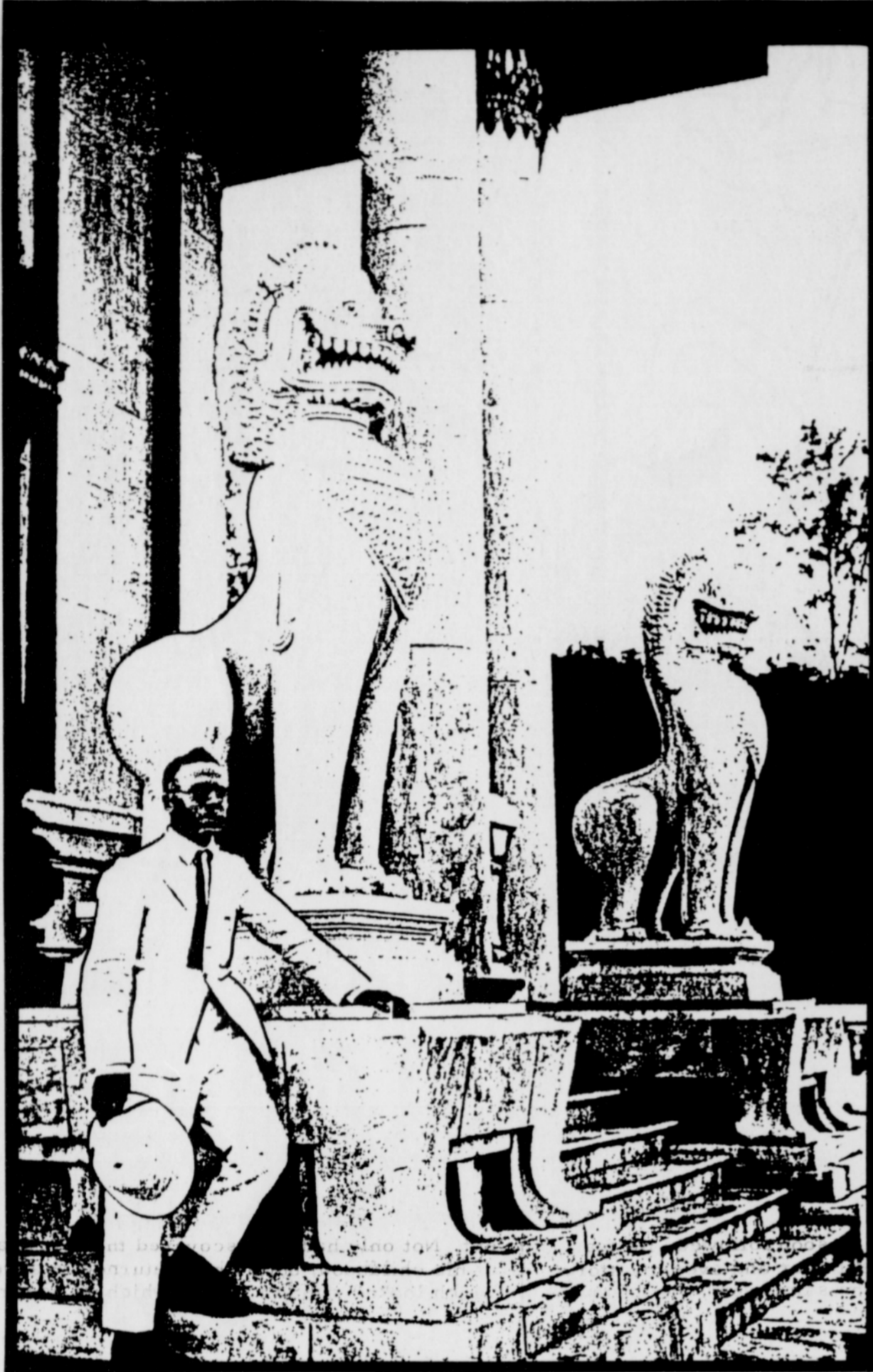




BY JOHN GOODENBERGER

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ANXIOUS WORRY



ERNEST GOODENBERGER, BANGKOK, 1930'S

Kuilungkiang was a bamboo hut village of 200 tribal people. It was nothing more than a clearing in the deep green jungle along the sweeping Mekong River. French Indo-China and Burma were within two days walk through the undergrowth. Monkeys, elephants, panthers and lions lived on the fringes of pocketed civilization. My father's childhood seemed idyllic. The tales of which, as a child, I never quite separated from Rudyard Kipling's short stories. For all intents and purposes, my father was Mowgli, raised by wild animals in a far away place so unlike the Rocky Mountain copper mining town where I was born. For years I dreamt of going to the place no less wonderful than Oz. One August, I traveled to that distant Chinese region, but it was not like my dreams.

My grandfather built a church in Kuilungkiang, surrounded by tall grass and tree clusters: a structure built by passionate natives, symbolizing their faith in an isolated missionary outpost. My grandfather died when I was 5, and I do not have much personal memory of him. But, the story of the church and his work in China has always been a part of my memory. My hope to perhaps find and worship in that church was no less important to me than a moslem worshipping

in Mecca. It was to be the focal point of this journey, until I was reminded of Ruth. I was probably a teenager before I heard mention of her, and even then she was only talked about in hushed voices or cryptic phrases. I never pursued the topic, figuring it was one of great family delicateness and pain. She was my father's sister, killed by pneumonia at the age of 4. I don't know whether the low voices were meant to protect my father, grandmother, or the assumed frail minds of children. But I do know the sudden shock I felt when someone at home suggested my father would search for his sister's grave in Kuilungkiang. The trip had become more than a fulfillment of childhood fantasies, it evolved into a deeply personal search for lost family.

I met my father and brother Mark in Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan Province. Together we traced the steps my grandparents had taken sixty-four years ago. What was once a twenty-six day ride by horseback was now a three day bus trip over and around mountains at high speeds. We survived better than many. At times passengers both in front and behind were leaning out windows exploding vomit. The road was so narrow they had to raise their heads to avoid decapitation by trucks hurling around corners. Not every vehicle made it along the 250 mile byway. Some would round corners three abreast. Those more fortunate would collide or run into trees. The less fortunate would flip end over end, down the mountainside, to the river below. I felt lucky. I was only bruised by the constant barrage of potholes on barely padded seats, and cut across the forehead by a window during one of our frequent, sudden stops.

The areas we drove through were closed to foreigners. We were given permission to pass through the region only after spending a day in Kunming walking back and forth, ten miles from one Foreign Affairs office to the next. I had put great pressure on myself to learn Chinese for this part of the trip. I felt a huge responsibility for keeping my father and brother safe in this potential political hot bed. I was told before leaving America that chances were quite good that we would not return alive. Drug runners or opium kings would shoot us if we stepped off the road or looked at them strangely. We were, after all, traveling to the edge of the infamous Golden Triangle. I wanted to learn Chinese to talk myself out of the wrong side of a gun.

The drug trade was less of a problem than the military, however. I had the Foreign Affairs officers of Zhengzhou write for me a letter of introduction to those in the South. They said they feared for me, and were afraid I would be attacked. On the train to Kunming I shared a cabin with a PLA (People's Liberation Army) soldier. He too was going to the same region. "The Vietnamese are sneaking across the border and killing the Chinese. Johann," he said with pride, "I'm going down there to kill the Vietnamese. For 250 miles, one military truck passed after the next. Some carried timber, others soldiers.

Our hotels were often modified military camps tucked away in Himalayan foothills. We were always separated from the nationals, sometimes ushered to our rooms by a soldier seeking foreign currency. One night I became sick from recurring bouts of food poisoning. It was 1:00 a.m. The door which once worked perfectly was now inoperable. The Men's restroom was down on the second floor. My only escape was to climb out my window then scoot across an out-



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