

Fritz and Ruth von Fleckenstein

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Location in Thailand:

Lampang

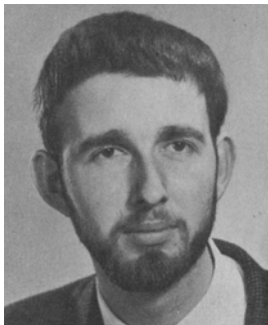
Thai Names:

Phinij, Ruchira

Current passion (who/what?)

Fritz: writing, gardening,
singing

Ruth: singing, hiking, travel



**Ruth and Fritz,
1962**



Ruth and Fritz, July 2004

Highlights since leaving Thailand

What careers have you had? Which was your favorite and why?

Fritz: Agricultural Economist (Mostly in Asia, some Africa, Europe)
Computer Programmer/Systems Analyst (Washington, DC)
Homemaker/Gardener/Writer (Washington, DC)

Being an agricultural economist was the most fun. I loved talking with the farmers, analyzing their problems and conveying this information to others. It was always enjoyable to meet people who had read and used my reports.

Ruth: Parenting

Public Health Education (Hawaii)
Unpaid research assistant (!) (Thailand, Hawaii, Indonesia)
Tutor (Instructor), History Department (U. of Papua New Guinea)
Braille Transcriber (San Francisco)
Home schooling daughters (P.N.G., Thailand)
Work with Lao refugees (Ithaca)
Elementary teacher, International School (Indonesia)
Computer Programmer/Systems Analyst (Indonesia, D.C.)

While the children were at home, I found that being a parent absorbed most of my energies and gave me the most satisfaction, even when I was doing other jobs. Since the children left home, I have found programming very satisfying because it suits my talents and I am

Favorite memory of Thailand

Fritz: Songkran in Lampang: three days that began with very solemn ceremonies pouring lustral water over the hands of one's superiors, beginning with the headmaster and ending in a great convergence of all officials at the governor's house, followed by increasingly wild water throwing and scented paste-smearing in the streets.

Ruth: One of my favorite memories is a visit we made to a village in Ayuthaya during the rainy season. The village was completely flooded, with raised houses for livestock as well as people. We went from house to house and to the market by boat and watched the children swimming and fishing in their own front yards. It was quite a contrast to the North, where even the heaviest rains ran off quickly in most places.

Tell us about your family and your life experiences.

Post-Peace Corps Wanderings

Hawaii (1966-71)

When we left Thailand in May 1965, we took our time getting home, and even visited Iran, which seemed very exotic after egalitarian Thailand. After lengthy stays in our parents' homes, we settled down in Honolulu for graduate study, Ruth in Public Health Education, and Fritz in Agricultural Economics. In 1968, after Fritz took a practical rice-growing course with a group of Peace Corps trainees bound for Ecuador, we returned to Thailand for a year of field work in the Northeast. We lived in Ban On, The Village of the Bamboo Rats, in Chaturaphakphiman District, Roi Et Province, with nine students from Khonkaen University, who helped us administer detailed questionnaires in Lao. After the students left, we stayed on, continuing our research, and participating in local festivals like Boon Bong Fai, where gunpowder-filled bamboo rockets are fired off. When we returned to Lampang for a visit, teachers were surprised at our understanding of Northern dialect, which is quite similar to Lao: when we were teaching there, we were insulated from the local dialect, because teachers were forbidden to speak it in class. Living with farmers was much more fun than living with teachers!

After returning to Hawaii to write up the research, Fritz finally produced a dissertation and received his Ph.D.

Papua New Guinea (1971-77)

In July 1971, we moved to Papua New Guinea so Fritz could take up his new job at the New Guinea Research Unit. While Ruth and Darunee went back to Thailand to adopt Pannee (see below), Fritz scouted locations for research, and finally settled on the Goroka valley in the Highlands. We moved into a village of the Ketarobo tribe, speakers of the Bena language, in early 1972, equipped with a Land Rover owned by the research unit, and spent a year gathering data and getting to know the people.

Living in a tribal society was quite different from living in a Thai village. Traditionally, there hadn't been any power greater than the tribe, and tribes still acted like nations, making war and forming alliances. Among the Bena people, the tribe was led by the man who was best able to lead (the "Big Man"), rather than by heredity. The "Big Man" in Ketarobo while we lived there was Forotime, who liked to greet Fritz by hugging him and lifting him off the ground. Our year in Ketarobo was punctuated by feasts, "Sing Sings" (tribal dances, usually hosted by one community for another community), tribal conflict, marriage ceremonies (again an occasion for gifts and exchanges between communities), pig exchanges, quarrels within the tribe (one of which resulted in a colonial judge throwing 27 men from Ketarobo into jail for a month), a burning tobacco barn (an indirect result of the imprisonment), and a complicated pregnancy that required a 3 a.m. ride to the hospital in Goroka. It was an extremely exhilarating stay!

After gathering our data, we returned to Port Moresby to write it up, and participate in the intellectual life of the capital. After Fritz finished his work at the research unit, he was offered a position teaching Economics at the University, so we moved across the road. The University was one of the most vibrant

institutions of higher learning that we have seen: all of the staff were fairly young and very imaginative and hard-working. At UPNG it was just assumed that you would write all of your instructional materials yourself, and some very interesting materials were produced. Ruth found herself teaching History of Science and Technology in the Foundation Year, an invention of the university for students who had no senior high school in their area. Both the students and the teachers were extremely informal, which was very pleasant indeed. While we were there, we were privileged to experience P.N.G.'s transition from colony to independent state in 1975.

San Francisco (1977-78)

In 1977, we left Papua New Guinea for San Francisco, in order to give Darunee a chance to attend a good high school, and to give Penny the chance to get a greater array of educational resources for visually handicapped persons. Fritz was on a half-year Sabbatical from UPNG, and spent the time writing up some of his research. We also took the opportunity to join a choir which sang renaissance and medieval music.

Thailand (1978-80)

We returned to Northeast Thailand in the hot season of 1978 to the FAO project at Huay Sri Thon in Kalasin. Fritz was able to incorporate Ban On as a dryland farming village to compare with an irrigated village in Kalasin: in cooperation with the Thai government Office of Agricultural Economics, he did an intensive study which involved farmers keeping detailed records of their daily activities during an entire year. Fritz made frequent visits to the farmers to discuss their records, and sometimes took other family members along on trips to Roi Et. The village had changed somewhat since 1969; the most notable change was electrification. Evening interviews were no longer conducted by dim kerosene lamps or candles, but illuminated by long bars of fluorescent lighting. Television sets in the village canteens were surrounded by gesticulating men cheering on boxers fighting in Bangkok. The night skies were not quite as bright with stars as they had been.

Ithaca (1980-82)

We moved to Ithaca to give Penny a chance to go to high school, while Darunee went off to Reed College. Fritz did consultancies for FAO, traveling to Bangladesh, Spain, Rome (several times), and Nepal and back to Papua New Guinea and Thailand, mostly helping to develop questionnaires for Farm Management studies, but also helping to develop and test an FAO software package (FARMAP) for analyzing such studies. Ruth took the opportunity to take Classical Greek and Computer programming classes at Cornell University. We again took the opportunity to join a church choir and a chorus. We found Ithaca to be a delightful place, although the winter was a bit too long. By the way, Bill Batt was living there when we arrived.

Indonesia (1983-85)

In January 1983, we moved to Ujung Pandang (formerly Makassar) in South Sulawesi (formerly Celebes) and the Maros Research Institute for Food Crops, where Fritz was to work as part of a nationwide USAID project. Both of the girls stayed in the U.S. to continue their studies.

Ujung Pandang was a shock: only a few degrees South of the equator, it was humid and muggy the year round, and the rainy season was not at all well-defined. Any standing water became alive with

vegetative growth within a day or two. Although the city is on the sea, there is no surf – the sea remains as still as glass.

Fritz drafted an Indonesian/English glossary of agricultural and economic terms, and then developed questionnaires and record books for an intensive study such as he had carried out in Kalasin, using the new code structures and analytical designs developed for FARMAP. Since FARMAP still did not run on microcomputers, and since our microcomputer was the only computer at the Institute, he needed to find a way to analyze the data. Ruth offered to learn dBase and write a system in that language to do the work. She created a very nice system indeed, which allowed printing of tables in either Indonesian or English, and which was later used by researchers in West Java.

Unfortunately, the USAID project on which Fritz was working was not well planned. The Indonesian colleagues he would have trained were doing graduate degrees in the U. S., and even the “second string” were more interested in improving their English than they were in research. He ended up having to do a lot of the data entry himself, with the help of a secretary, whom he hired. When it came time to write the final report, Fritz had become very debilitated with a mysterious ailment which seemed to involve depletion of Vitamin B6 and Folic Acid. Despite injections of these vitamins, he had almost no energy, and no appetite. He dictated the final report to Ruth while lying on his bed, and requested an early end to his contract. We have since then met people from Singapore who noted that nuns sent to Indonesian missions often came down with this disease, which disappeared once they returned to Singapore.

Washington DC (1985- present)

In March, 1985, we left Indonesia, earlier than we expected due to a misunderstanding with our project director, and dawdled on our way home, waiting for the West to warm up, visiting Egypt and Yemen (where Darunee was now in the Peace Corps herself), spending Easter in Bavaria (where we shivered in heavy sweaters), and stopping in Rome to arrange for future FAO consultancies.

We decided to settle in Washington, as it had easy airline connections to Rome, through which Fritz had to travel to his various consultancies (getting out of Ithaca in winter had been difficult), and as Penny (as she was now known) was living in the area. We arrived in mid-April, and rented an apartment. Our first few weeks in the city were an orgy of buying, cultural events and walking, which we found marvelously easy after the crowded streets of Ujung Pandang, where people and vehicles all mixed together with no sidewalks and noxious trash-filled canals. We even ventured to declare Washington “a paradise”, a remark that was greeted with scorn by local citizens.

Fritz began traveling as a consultant again:

1. Zambia (1985), questionnaire with dBase FARMAP; jaundice.
2. China (1986), questionnaire with FARMAP.
3. Thailand (1987), AIT: analyze data with China team.
4. India (1987,1988; 1991,1992: multiple visits): FARMAP conversion of annual All-India Cost of Cultivation Survey from mainframe to microcomputers.
5. Sri Lanka (1989), mid-term evaluation of USAID project.
- X. Jordan (1989) : Darunee’s wedding!
6. Lesotho (1989), dBase procedures to analyze soil conservation study.
7. Thailand (1990,1991; multiple visits), questionnaires for FARMAP, Office of Agr. Econ.
8. Rome (1990), manual for FARMAP 5, (finished in Washington.)

9. Hungary (1992), course in FARMAP for Hungarians, Czechs, Poles.

After 1992, consultancies dried up. In his spare time, Fritz had been helping Ruth design a computerized accounting system for their church, and he decided to try to get a job in computer programming. He finally succeeded in 1995, and worked for a contractor for the Department of Justice for the next four years. Since then, he has been a homemaker.

Meanwhile, Ruth was able to get work as a computer programmer in late 1985. After a couple of short consultancies, she was hired by a temp agency to do programming at the Department of Transportation. Amazingly, she has been there ever since, working for five different contractors and surviving several major upheavals in the agency for which the work was done. A number of other programmers have also survived the changes, and it makes a very pleasant work environment. For the last ten years or more, Ruth has been responsible for software on laptop computers carried by inspectors who visit trucking companies to see that all federal regulations are being obeyed. The other programmers on the team are working on the central database, where the information from these visits is eventually sent, which permits coordination of the field software with what is needed at headquarters. Another pleasant aspect of the job is the chance to work closely with some very bright government people, who have plans stretching far into the future.

Family

When we left Thailand in May 1965, our daughter Darunee was 11 months old. We went to Hawaii in January 1966, which was a wonderful place to raise a child: a multi-ethnic society, a nice climate (no boots or snowsuits!), and a generally relaxed atmosphere. We met our second daughter, Pannee, while doing field work in Thailand in 1968. Pannee, who later changed her name to Penny, was born blind in a village in Khorat Province on January 1, 1965. Ruth was able to arrange for her adoption in 1971, and brought her to Papua New Guinea in early 1972. Ruth had studied Braille in order to help Penny, and taught both of the children during our field stays, and again in 1978 when we returned to Thailand for a two year assignment in Kalasin. Penny dropped out of American University in 1984 to have her first child (who has just entered the Nursing program at Marywood University in Scranton, PA), and since then has had four more children. She lives with her husband in Binghamton, NY. Darunee attended Reed (class of 1984), joined the Peace Corps in Yemen in 1985, and then worked for Peace Corps headquarters in DC. In 1989, she married an Englishman whom she had met in Yemen. She taught English for a year in a private high school for Girls in Amman, Jordan, then moved to Arizona where she did an M. Ed. in Teaching English to high school students while her husband did an MBA at Thunderbird. She followed her husband, now an investment banker, to Houston, Connecticut, London, and back to Connecticut. Although she had trained as a high school teacher, she found her initial experience in the Houston school system so traumatic that she turned to teaching executives to use software packages, and finally to running the help desk at Xerox. Since 1998 she has been a full-time mom with her two daughters.

The Present State

Our health is good, although not perfect. Fritz had an angioplasty with a stent in 1995, but the year 2000 was very eventful: a broken wrist in February, a stent in March, an angioplasty in July, restenosis in September, and a double coronary artery bypass graft (CABG) in October. His cholesterol and hypertension are under control with medication, diet and exercise, and he has had no more angina since then. Ruth has Type II Diabetes, which she controls with medication, diet and exercise. We also bought

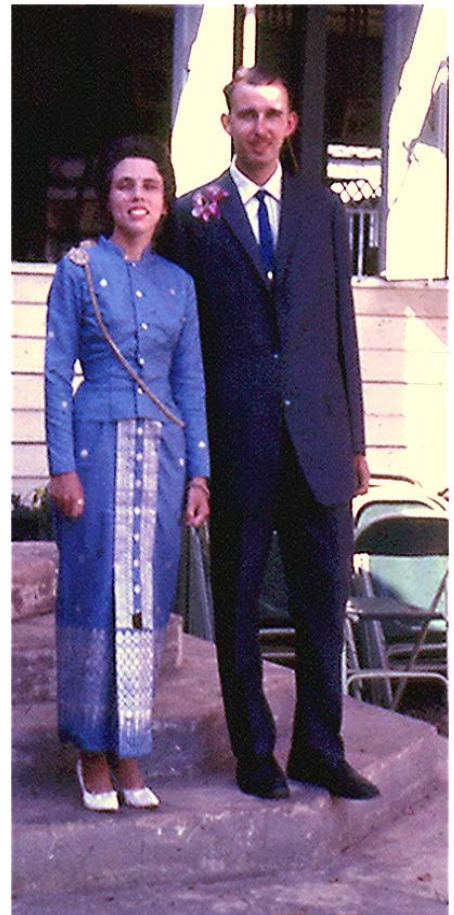
a bungalow in 2000, in the leafy Brookland neighborhood, and moved in just before Fritz's bypass. Since then, we have slowly been discovering the joys of gardening, and acquiring the necessary self-confidence, patience and attention to the seasons and weather. We also continue to sing; we belong to three singing groups, which means three evening rehearsals a week: a university Town and Gown chorus, a Gregorian Chant Schola, and our church choir. As for politics, we are helpless, with no voting representation in Congress, even though we pay Federal taxes. Help! Write/Call/Email your Congressmen and Senators! Free us! Many thanks!

What do you want to do when you grow up?

Fritz: I have always wanted to be a novelist, and I wrote many bad Science Fiction stories when I was a child. Now, I am beginning to write a novel about my mother, a woman of many mysteries. I'm still learning how to make a time sacred to writing.

Ruth: I'd really love to get really good at Greek, or maybe study Hebrew or Sanskrit. On the other hand, I have a great yen to hike our National Parks and go on some of those hiking tours abroad. If growing up means having clear, consistent goals, I don't think I'll ever make it.

What do you wish we had asked and what is your answer? Ruth and Fritz: nothing



**Wedding, Lampang,
May 2, 1963**