



# WEBFOOTER EXTRA

FEBRUARY 2018

## A Look at Life in Siam from 1890 to 1918



Rev. William Briggs, MD, FRGS, OBE in Siam with a man-killing tiger they had hunted down.

- ◆ The Story of Reverend Dr. Briggs in Siam in the 1890s – see page 2.

### **WEBFOOTERS POST CARD CLUB**

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# THE STORY OF REV. DR. WILLIAM ALBERT BRIGGS, MD, FRGS, OBE,

Medical Doctor, Fellow of the Royal  
Geographic Society, Officer of the Order  
of the British Empire.

By Steve King

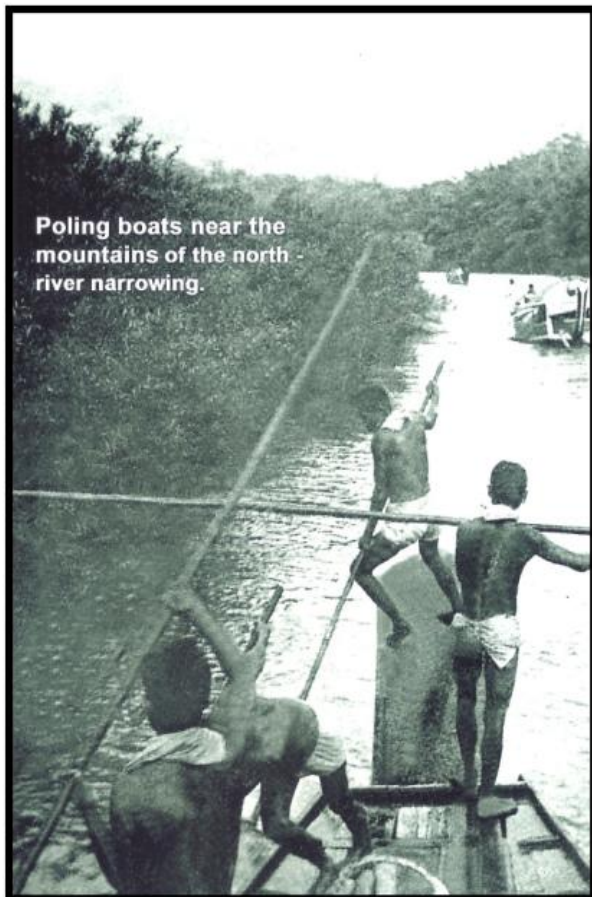


My great grandfather on my maternal side was a Canadian citizen that dedicated his life to the Presbyterian Foreign Mission. He served in far northern Siam, (now Thailand) from 1890 to 1918. The Presbyterian Siam Missionaries were nearly the first Westerners the tribes of the Lao area of Siam had contact with. Dr. Briggs was an evangelist, medical doctor, builder, poet and photographer, including production of postcards. It is this last skill that is the focus of this article.



Traveling in  
the jungles of  
Northern Siam





Poling boats near the mountains of the north - river narrowing.



Father and Mary

Dr. Briggs was born in Toronto in 1867. He obtained his medical degree from the University of the City of New York (now City University of New York) in 1890. Upon graduation, he married Alice Hamilton, a fellow student, and they departed for Siam in service to the Presbyterian Foreign Mission. They arrived in Lakawn (now Lampang), Siam in December 1890 after months of travel. Dr. Briggs took charge of the hospital.

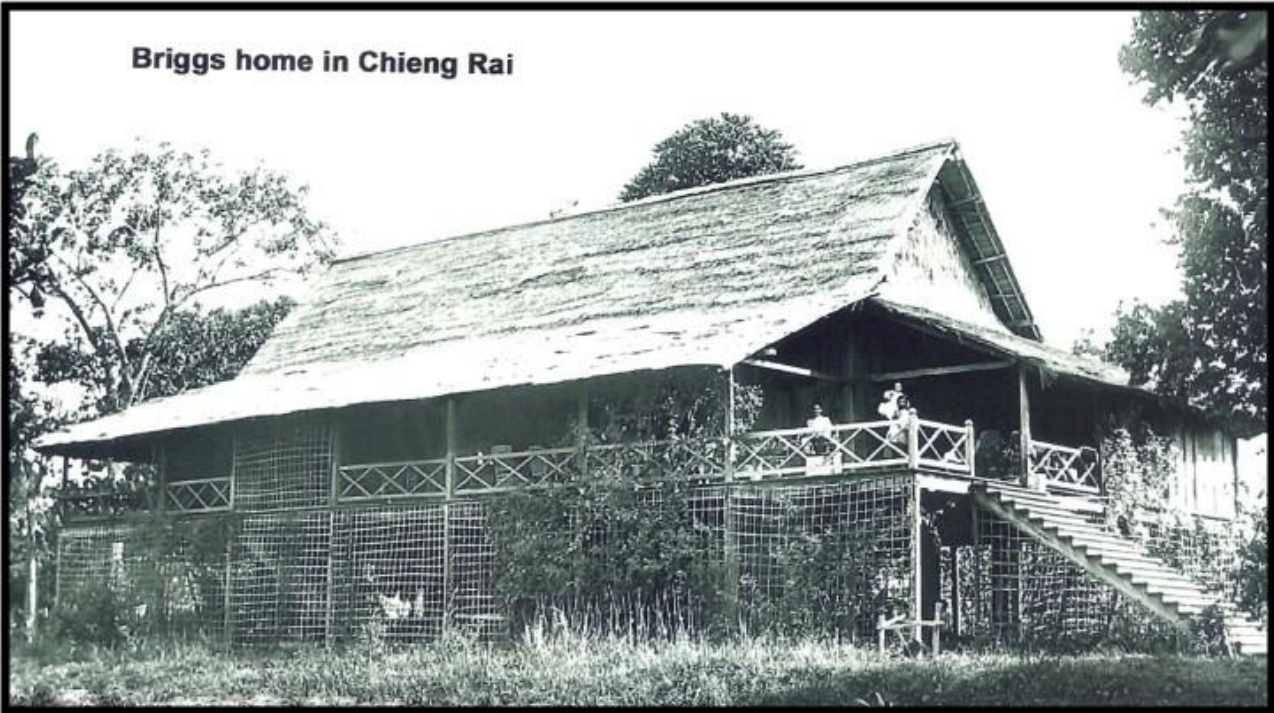
Travel in Siam in the 19th Century was difficult. The country had little transportation infrastructure outside of Bangkok. The 500-mile journey north to Lakawn and beyond was by poling boats up the Me Nam (now Chao Phraya) River, taking six weeks.

Shortly after the Briggses arrived at the Lakawn Mission Station, his wife Alice died at the age of 25. It was not uncommon for western missionaries to suffer illness or die in the difficult climate and circumstances throughout the mission fields.

In 1892, a lady missionary teacher, Miss Annabelle King, arrived in Lakawn. On September 22, 1893, Dr. Briggs and Miss King traveled back down river and were married in Bangkok. The British Consul was the only entity allowed by law to officiate at the weddings of British subjects. After another long journey poling upstream, they settled into missionary life. Seven children would follow, five of whom survived to adulthood. The fourth child was my grandmother Mary.

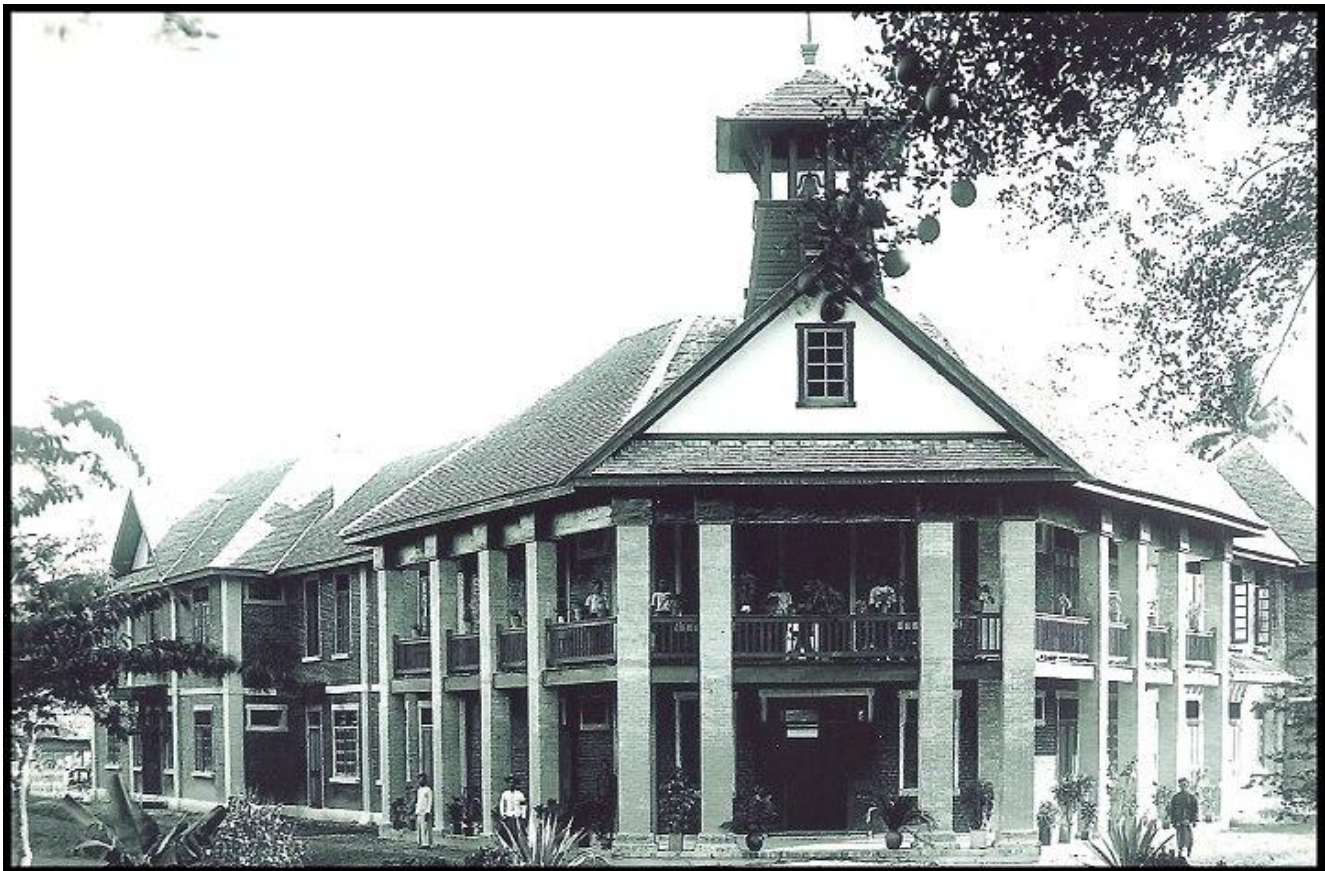
Dr. Briggs undertook his medical responsibilities and Annabelle began teaching. Missionaries would also make periodic travels into the jungle of Siam to villages for evangelical purposes.

**Briggs home in Chieng Rai**



Mrs. Briggs did not like riding the elephants as a means of transportation; she preferred ponies. Other missionaries preferred elephants. One of the advantages was the dramatic entrance into primitive villages, where villagers may not have seen Westerners before.



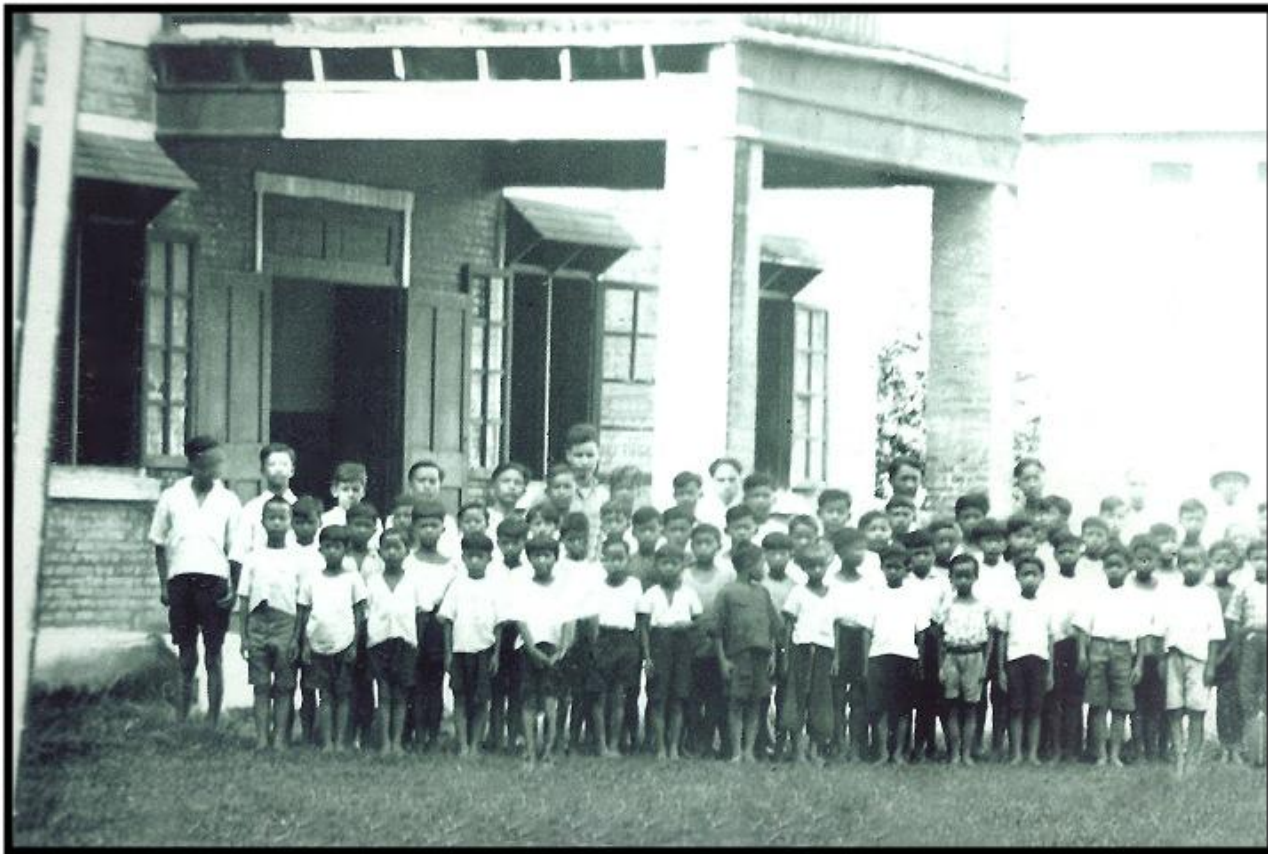


The front view of Overlook Hospital in Chiang Rai which had 44 beds and was later expanded.



Dr. Briggs raised the funds and built the First Church as well as the Overlook Hospital.





Dr. Briggs also raised the funds and built the Boys School in Chiang Rai.

After a one-plus year sabbatical in the United States, the Briggses returned to Siam to the even more northern station in Chiang Rai, (now Chiang Rai) in 1900. Chiang Rai was to be their permanent station and home until 1918.

Over several years, Dr. Briggs the builder began modernizing Chiang Rai. Overbrook Hospital, First Church and Boys School were all built by Dr. Briggs. The Overbrook Hospital, greatly expanded, still serves Chiang Rai. He used the stone wall surrounding the city for paving stones to replace muddy roads. He drained the swamps and built a sewage system. He and Dr. Hugh Taylor provided medicines for malaria and vaccines for small pox. Dr. Briggs performed operations especially for bladder stones. Dr. James McKean established a leper asylum in Chiangmai (now Chiang Mai). When natives were relieved or cured, full credit was given to Jesus, further enticing the natives into a Christian life.

The Briggs family returned to North America for their second sabbatical in 1906-1908 visiting the Northeastern United States and Canada.

Upon returning to Siam in 1908, Dr. and Mrs. Briggs continued their work in Chiang Rai. A family favorite image from that time period was a photo staged by Dr. Briggs of a dead, man-killing tiger they had hunted down. Natives of Siam were terrified of tigers. People lived in tightly clustered villages and at times kept a fire burning all night to ward off tiger visits. The men would work their rice fields only in the daytime. Few tigers exist in Thailand today.



The Briggs family returned to North America for their second sabbatical in 1906-1908. A fishing trip to Moosehead, Maine was illustrated in many real photo postcards. Several were sent to Mrs. Briggs, visiting in Toronto and two of them are shown here.







During a third sabbatical leave in 1912-1914, Dr. Briggs built a permanent family home in Vancouver, British Columbia named Bon Dui (Siamese for “Beautiful Mountain Home”). Several other missionary families also retired to Vancouver.

In April 1914, Dr. Briggs returned alone to Chiang Rai to continue his work, leaving Annabelle to care for their growing children. Shortly after he returned to Chiang Rai, World War I broke out in Europe. Dr. Briggs was a British subject (Canadian) and followed progress of the war closely. By this time, telegraph wires had reached Chiang Rai from Bangkok. A German-built railroad line to the north was being completed.

Dr. Briggs was in ill health during his 1914-to-1918 tour. He returned to Vancouver in July 1918 to recuperate. It was planned that upon recovering his health, he and Annabelle would return to Siam to continue the work. The children would be able to care for themselves.

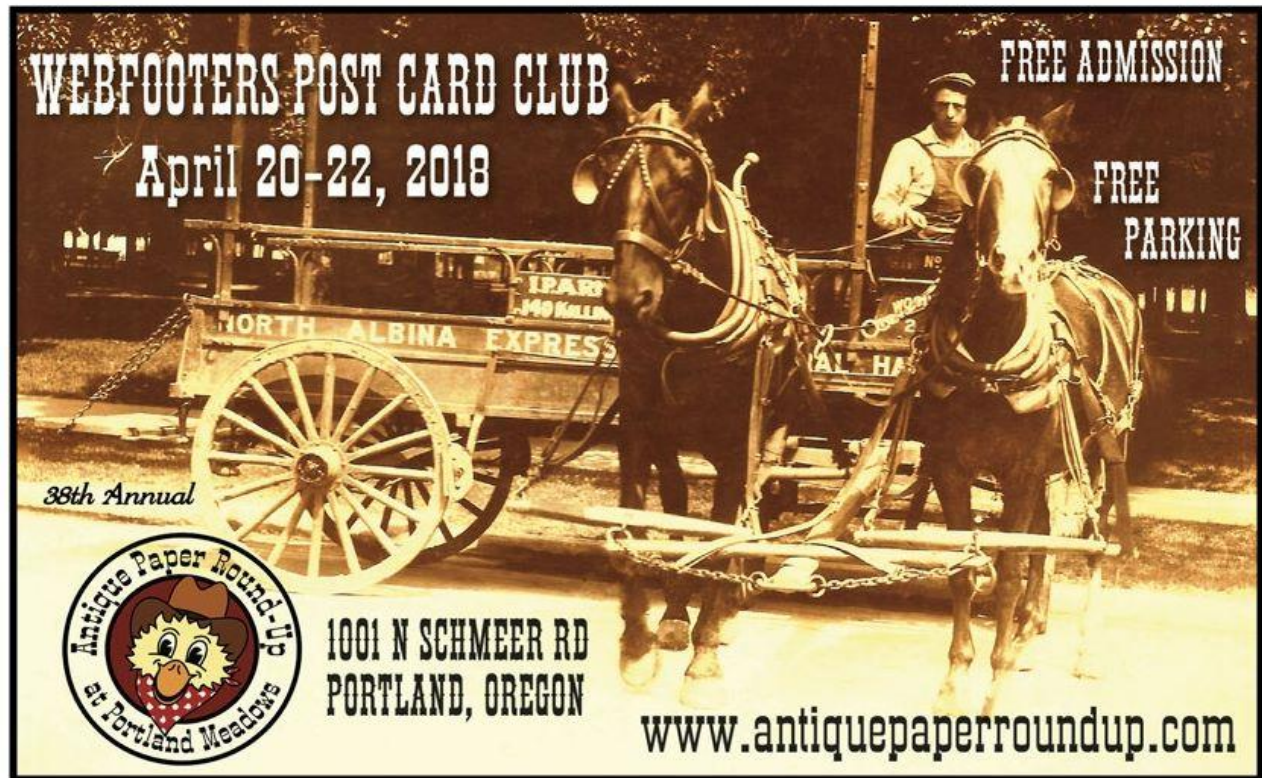
At the age of 51, Dr. Briggs died in Vancouver General Hospital on February 24, 1919. Three weeks before his death, as he was lying critically ill in the hospital, Dr. Briggs was presented the OBE badge. King George V had appointed Dr. Briggs as an officer of the Order of the British Empire based on the recommendation of the British India government through the British Minister of Bangkok for “Good work for India in connection with seditious Indians, operating during World War I in Chiang Rai.”

About six months before Dr. Briggs died, the family received a telegram that their oldest son Pte. Albert Edgar Briggs was killed in action in France while serving in the Canadian Machine Gun Corps. The consequences of the two deaths had a deep and lasting effect on the Briggs family.

Presbyterian missionary activities in Siam continued into the 1960s, primarily in an advisory role. Christianity is followed by only a small number of Thai currently. The Church of Christ manages the Overbrook Hospital. A new Christian Church recently replaced the original church that Dr. Briggs built more than 100 years ago. Descendants of Dr. Briggs visited Chiang Rai in 2007 and were hailed as “The Briggses have Returned.”



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