

# Telling It Like It Was

Book depicts fading-disappearing way of life at Sungai Buloh

## *Valley of Hope* *The Sungai Buloh National Leprosy Control Centre*

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In 1930, a lush valley 25 kilometers from Kuala Lumpur became the largest leprosy colony in the British Commonwealth. Sungai Buloh Settlement (later Leprosarium and now the National Leprosy Control Centre) would eventually be home to as many as 2,400 people affected by the disease.

For almost four decades, through World War II and the birth of an independent Malaysia, the occupants lived in virtual isolation from the outside world. Managed by a medical superintendent and his staff, with its operations supported by the able-bodied among the residents, the leprosarium had its own rules and regulations, its own currency, school, places of worship, social clubs, fire brigade, police force and even a prison.

Over time, Sungai Buloh has been transformed. With the implementation of the



national leprosy control program in 1969, the emergence of an effective cure for leprosy in the 1980s and the graying of the resident population, a way of life known only to a few is gradually being obliterated. For many outsiders, the name Sungai Buloh has become synonymous with flowers and plants rather than with leprosy, as commercial nurseries thrive there. A general hospital complex serving the surrounding area

has also recently opened.

*Valley of Hope* sets out to record the story of the settlement while there are still those alive to tell the tale. Its enterprising authors (*see below*) make clear that this is a story about the leprosarium and its people, not a disease, and their research is largely based on interviews with surviving residents. The book's title is how Sungai Buloh was once known — as a place where people lived in hope of a cure.

Sungai Buloh was constructed in the wake of

## A STORY ABOUT PEOPLE, NOT DISEASE

*Co-author Joyce Wong describes how writing Valley of Hope enriched her life.*

### How did you become interested in Sungai Buloh?

I was born there and brought up nearby. My parents had been patients and moved out after my birth as they were not allowed to raise children within the compound. As I grew older, I came to understand more about the leprosarium and appreciate its unique story.

### Why write a book?

I brought Siew Sia, my co-author, to the leprosarium in 2002 and briefed her on its past. She was fascinated by the beauty of the place and impressed by the history, and suggested we start a project to preserve its story. At first, we just planned to do a brief write-up and collect some photos. As we worked on, the materials as well as our sentimental attachment to the leprosarium grew and

we decided to do a book.

### How did you go about your research?

Since we could find very little documentation on the leprosarium's history, most of our research was based on interviews with residents, ex-residents and their families, observing the daily routine and studying old photos. We had a lot of interaction with the residents. In fact, most of our weekends during the two years of our research were spent in Sungai Buloh.

### What makes Sungai Buloh special?

Sungai Buloh is a one-of-a-kind place, probably in the whole world. Very seldom can we find such a well-organized, self-sufficient community that has been isolated from the outside world for several decades. The institutionalized lifestyle has had such a strong influence on the community's culture and habits.

It's a repository of stories of patients who have struggled to live through both the physical and psychological sufferings caused by leprosy. As such, it is a very important part of the history of leprosy in this country as well as the world.

### What did you know about leprosy as a child?

I didn't know much since my parents hardly told us anything about it and didn't want us to talk about it in public. It wasn't until I started to go to school that I realized how different the outside world was from the place that I grew up. Then I started to hear from classmates and teachers that leprosy was a dreadful disease and that patients were kept isolated for fear of infection. But I knew it wasn't infectious as I used to hang around the leprosarium and never heard of any cases of healthy people or children getting the disease from another patient. I also knew it can cause