



Sungai Buloh Internal Currency: This one-dollar note was printed on January 15, 1936.

the 1926 Leper Enactment Act, which required the segregation and treatment of those with the disease. Given the dire conditions in existing facilities, the idea behind Sungai Buloh was to create a self-contained community where patients could live in humane surroundings while under medical supervision.

Brought together by a common disease, this community was “a melting pot of different races, cultures, backgrounds, histories, nationalities.” In fact, the population of the leprosarium was dominated by ethnic Chinese, who far outnumbered Malays and Indians, and in pre-independence days there was also a handful of Japanese, Eurasians and Gurkha soldiers under treatment.

In chapters covering everything from medical care and living arrangements to schooling and social clubs, the authors recount what life was like for young and old, single and married in Sungai Buloh. One of the central figures in the book is a lady they call Saw Cheng, whose life they follow from the time she was admitted as a girl of 14 to when she has become a woman of 82 with failing eyesight and a missing leg.

Through Saw Cheng, readers are introduced to the admissions procedure, the loneliness and

dislocation experienced by new arrivals, the gradual adjustment to Sungai Buloh's routine, the rigors of treatment with dapsone injections, annual tea parties and costume competitions, and the strength of spirit of the now mostly elderly residents. “I have served my time longer than any convict sentenced to life imprisonment,” Saw Cheng tells the authors with no apparent trace of rancor.

Today there are under 400 inhabitants of Sungai Buloh, ranging in age from their 40s to their 90s. Many are too old or infirm to live elsewhere. Every inch of spare land, it seems, is given over to cultivating flowers, trees and turf. Commercial gardening — a rehabilitation program suggested by a past medical superintendent — has become big business, and is attracting an influx of outsiders and immigrants.

Fearing that the unique history of Sungai Buloh was disappearing without a proper accounting of it, the authors set about their work. In writing this book, they have constructed an affectionate monument to the people who spent their lives there, even as the buildings they once lived in are slowly crumbling away. ■

deformities and long-term suffering, as in the case of foot ulcers. But for outsiders like my classmates, who had never seen a leprosy patient, it would have been hard for them not to be fearful. Leprosy is an often misunderstood disease.



Co-authors Joyce Wong (standing, second from left) and Siew Sia (standing, far right) visit the elderly residents with some of their friends.

Has the experience of writing this book changed you?

The most precious thing Siew Sia and I gained from writing *Valley of Hope* is our friendship with a group of elderly residents. Through them, we learned to count our blessings. By helping them out in small ways, such as making phone calls and writing letters, we experienced the joy of giving and how lucky it is to be the giver. In fact, we still visit them very often and take other friends with us. Personally, I found my life became much more meaningful during the three years spent on the research and writing, even though I had to sacrifice a lot of my time and energy. I look at life from a different perspective now. This project has also opened the door for me to explore more of myself and to embark on activities that are spiritually fulfilling. I think I can say the same for Siew Sia, too.

What should the legacy of Sungai Buloh be?

The story of its people. There is a lot to be learned from them. It still amazes me to see how strong some of the older residents are, how they are able to live independently in spite of their physical condition. Some of them are without hands and legs, some are blind. They have been deprived of the basics in life that we take for granted and yet they live their lives with dignity, without complaining.

But it's sad to note how tremendously this place has changed. The older generation that is the “trademark” of Sungai Buloh is slowly fading away. There is an influx of outsiders. Some of them have created a lot of social problems. The older residents who are so defenseless are left at the mercy of these people. We hope that more care and attention can be given to these old folks. ■