Edward C. Britton papers, 1913-1996

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Collection consists of personal papers, including correspondence, reports, and newsclippings, of Edward C. Britton, Professor of Pacific Asian Studies, College of Social Sciences and Interdisciplinary Studies, CSU, Sacramento. The collection reflects various aspects of life in Vietnam before and during the Vietnam conflict, 1961-1975.

Conditions Governing Access note
For information about this collection, contact the Head of the Department of Special Collections & University Archives.

Biographical Note
Edward Britton was a professor in the Education Department, California State University, Sacramento, from 1950 until 1987. From 1959 to 1961 he served as a teacher education advisor to the government of South Vietnam, helping to form their secondary educational system. Between 1961 and 1964, Britton made four documentary films in Vietnam, including The Village That Refused to Die (made with Stan Atkinson of channel 13) that recorded life in the village of Binh Hung, in the southern tip of Vietnam, and the work of Father Bien Hoa, a Chinese Catholic priest. Other films included The Other Vietnam; Vietnam Today; and Partners in Progress, which documented the work of the International Voluntary Service (IVS), a group that inspired the establishment of the Peace Corps.

In 1964, Britton’s work came to the attention of George Tanham who was working with the U.S. Overseas Mission (USOM), the AID activity in Vietnam. After the fall of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in 1963, Tanham had grown increasingly interested in the potential role of students and student organizations in the reconstruction efforts underway. At Tanham’s recommendation, Britton was hired by the Rand Corporation in 1964 to survey student organizations. His reports convinced AID to support the first systematic nationwide reconstruction effort – the Summer Youth Program (SYP) in 1965. Britton stayed on to help organize this effort, along with Charles Sweet, Youth Advisor to IVS.

The Summer Youth Program of 1965 was actually an umbrella organization that included a number of distinct voluntary youth programs planned and organized by student leaders. “The SYP initiated some 200 work camps in Vietnam. Twenty-two of these work camps were sponsored by the SYP but carried out by already established organizations such as the Boy Scouts, Buddhist Student Association, etc., 138 work camps by province SYP committees; and 36 work camps by the Saigon and Hue centers.”

Ultimately more than 8,000 students participated in a variety of two week work camps, month long urban refugee programs, or two-month programs in the hamlets. Work included a variety of public works projects – building roads, refugee housing, orphanages, schools, bridges, etc. The SYP ’65 was a landmark in the development of further voluntary youth programs. In addition to the role they played in reconstruction efforts, these programs also continued for a number of years to produce trained leadership, many of whom went on to play important roles in the South Vietnamese government.

Britton described the value of his collection as documenting “a little known but very important element of Vietnamese life in the 1960’s – a national youth social service movement.”

Although Britton’s work with the Summer Youth Program ended after 1966, he continued to work on a variety of other projects associated with Vietnamese students and education programs both inside South Vietnam and the United States. Just before the fall of Saigon in 1975, Britton carried out a rescue operation for students with whom he had worked. He helped establish a Vietnamese resettlement center on the CSUS campus. Britton also worked in refugee camps in Thailand for Cambodian refugees who were fleeing from the Khmer Rouge.

In addition to these documentary film projects, Britton also took thousands of feet of film footage and hundreds of slides documenting Vietnamese life from 1959 to 1980.

Preferred Citation note
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