

HeRD #297 - Bears, Karen, & Noi Wong

Medical care, historically, has played an important part in the conversion of northern Thais to Christianity. Here's the case of Noi Wong, who in a sense experienced a two-part conversion. According to Hugh Taylor, writing in the May 1905 issue of *WOMAN'S WORK FOR WOMAN*, Noi Wong lived in Lampang Province. One day he was mauled by a bear and taken into the missionary hospital in the city. We can assume his case was a desperate one as the missionary doctors weren't called upon by rural peoples very often unless the injured or ill party was at death's door and local remedies had failed. While in the hospital, Noi Wong converted to Christianity. When he left the hospital, however, the Christian community and the missionaries lost track of him. One day, he reappeared asking for someone to visit his home village and baptize his family and a neighboring family. He related to Taylor how he had, in fact, lost interest in his new religion until he heard the singing and praying of Karen Christians. Although he didn't understand a word of what was going on he was profoundly impressed with its spiritual depth, and the experience helped him to realize that God had sent the bear as a way to bring him to Christianity.

The Karens referred to here were members of a small cluster of Karen Baptist churches founded near Lampang in the early 1880s. They were the only Karen churches in the North and the only Christian communities not associated with the Presbyterian Laos Mission. By 1905, these churches were struggling in a number of ways to maintain viable congregational life, and the general image of them is that they were quite weak. It is interesting, thus, to find that they nonetheless had sufficient strength to impress other, nominal Christians rather deeply. The Lampang Station of the Laos Mission maintained occasional and informal contacts with these Karen Churches.

Source: Hugh Taylor, "Bear-Bitten Noi Wong," *WOMAN'S WORK FOR WOMAN* 20, 5(May 1905): 113-114.