

Lam Son Square Mob: Saigon orphans survive

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When they aren't out selling, these boys from Lam Son Square in Saigon play five-card stud on sidewalk. 'Only men can gamble,' says Minh (third from left). "Girls just lose their money." Other

boys enjoying card playing, a favorite Vietnamese pastime, are: [from left] Hoi, 15, Sai, 14, and Trung, 13.

Tribune Photos by Ronald Yates

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By Ronald Yates
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SAIGON—Their world is a square concrete chunk of downtown Saigon, a place where thick blue smoke from

thousands of Honda motorbikes and ancient Renault taxis hangs heavy in the humid air along with the acrid smell of urine from the gutters.

It is not a world they asked for, but it is the only one they know. It is an unmerciful place that teaches survival,

tho most of Lam Son Square's street kids learned how to survive long before they arrived in Saigon.

Most have seen their parents die in what to them seems an incomprehensible yet deadly political chess match between Hanoi and Saigon.

CONFUSED, STARVING, and afraid, they drifted from the destruction of their country homes toward Saigon, where they had heard that a kid could feed himself by begging, stealing, or even finding work if he were lucky.

Eventually they learned there was safety in numbers. They formed a loose confederation and staked out a patch of concrete around South Viet Nam's hulking National Assembly building.

Here the Lam Son Square Mob practices its own brand of capitalism—a blend of aggressive salesmanship and flim-flam.

Some sell newspapers and magazines with an intensity that would startle Horatio Alger. Others shine shoes—often whether you want it or not—and then call you a "Cheap Charlie" if you don't cough up 100 piasters [about 15 cents] when they finish chasing your moving shoes with their brushes.

SOME CARRY letters, written in English and encased in plastic, announcing that they are members of an orphanage [usually nonexistent] and "would you please contribute to save the children?"

Little girls with flashing dark eyes, wearing American T-shirts, sell peanuts they carry in wicker baskets.

All in all, they make just enough to survive—sometimes.

In the last two years things have been rough for the Lam Son Square Mob—American dollars have dwindled to a trickle from the flood they knew when American GIs stalked Saigon's streets.

"Two years ago I could make 3,000 piasters [about \$5] a day. Now I'm lucky to make 250 a day," laments 15-year-old Minh—the unofficial leader of the mob.

BEING THE leader of the mob carries no special privileges because on the streets of Saigon there are no privileges. Minh sleeps in a doorway next to a hotel—his open-air abode for five years.

He has two shirts and two pairs of denim shorts which he alternately washes at a public faucet. He eats one meal a day—usually breakfast—consisting of rice, some vegetables, and, if he is lucky, a few scraps of chicken.

After breakfast—usually at 6 a. m.—Minh begins his 18-hour day on Saigon's streets. He would work longer than 18 hours, but the government enforces a curfew between midnight and 5 a. m.

The other members of the Lam Son Square Mob live about the same life, with the exception of Sai, 14, who sleeps in a booth in a bar along with an assortment of whores and bargirls because his older brother works there as a handyman.

"Actually, I'm pretty lucky," says Minh with almost unbelievable optimism. "I've never been sick and I've been on the streets for five years. Many of my friends were on the streets less time than that and they died."

MOST OF the Lam Son Square Mob's business is conducted at the "Continental shelf," the huge outdoor terrace that wraps around two sides of the ancient Continental Palace Hotel.

Here, amid the decaying splendor of



This boy, hobbling along a Saigon street, spends most of his day begging. He is one of hordes of Vietnamese children who have been victims of rocket attacks.

French colonial Saigon, with its slowly rotating ceiling fans, potted ferns, and elderly French-speaking Vietnamese waiters, Europeans and Americans congregate for coffee or a Singapore Sling.

As soon as a customer pulls up a chair at one of the tables, the Lam Son Square Mob goes into action.

"Hey, mister, you want shoe shine—I shine good." Or "Hey, how about a paper mister." Or, "I sell you peanuts plenty cheap. You like?"

If those pitches fail, the mob may send one of its members up onto the terrace to apply more pressure in defiance of the hotel management, which

has hired a muscular Vietnamese man to bounce members of the mob off the premises.

"YOU TAKE your chances," says Minh with a philosophical shrug.

"I ain't afraid of that bouncer," boasts Sai in shaky English, which he proudly proclaims he learned from a GI from "Philly."

Sai is a chain smoker, and if he feels he has established rapport with a customer, he will ask for a "few butts."

"HEY, MY friend Billy from Philly, he one time tell me he get me job in America. . . . Me and him, we like brothers," says Sai, suddenly in a rem-

iniscent frame of mind. "But I no hear from him for a long time now. If you see him, you tell him I'm still at Lam Son Square."

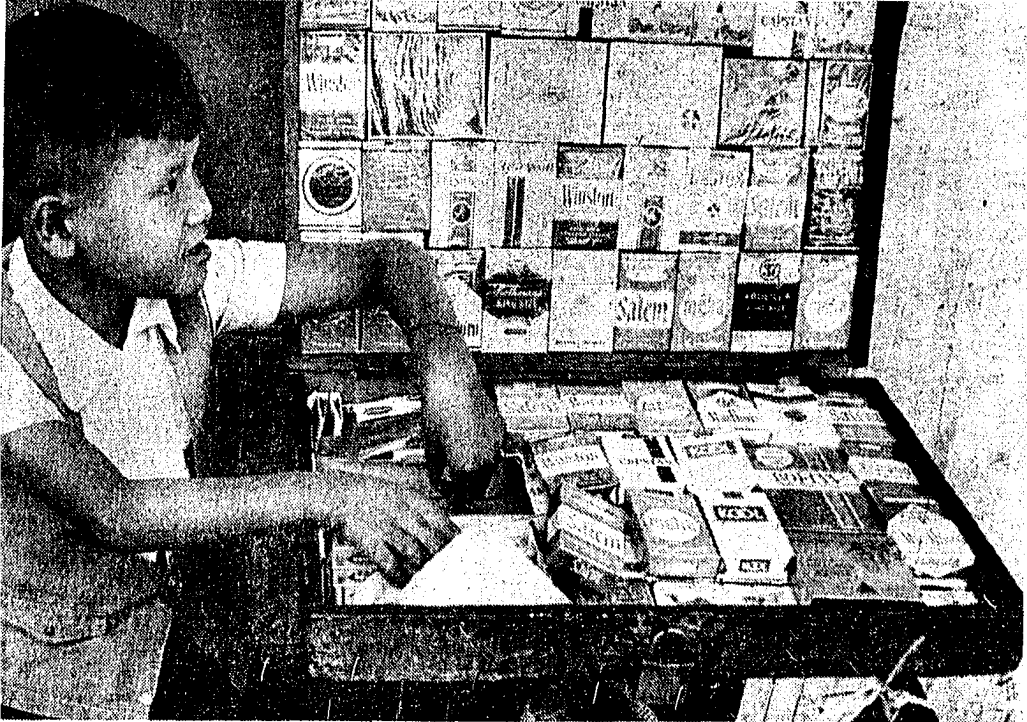
"Hey, I kick your butt all the way to Hanoi if you don't start shinin' shoes," threatens Minh. And Sai, flipping a fragment of a cigaret into the gutter, gives chase to a Japanese businessman with dull shoes.

"Actually, Sai knows I won't kick him around," says Minh. "He isn't afraid of anything."

"Well, maybe he is afraid of one thing. The same thing all of us are afraid of—getting drafted into the army. You can get killed there."



Young street vendor sells pencils to motorists who stop for traffic lights on a street in Vietnamese capital.



A youthful entrepreneur on Saigon's Tu Do street sells American and English cigarets obtained from the black market which flourishes in the Vietnamese capital.