*My 45 years with the RASKB*

Bae Sue Ja (Sue Bae)

My career at the RAS-KB started with a phone call on February 27, 1967 from Mr. Robert A. Kinney, who was a friend of my uncle. It was a few days after I graduated from Seoul National University. Over the phone, Mr. Kinney gave me a general explanation of the RAS-KB and its activities, and then told me that they urgently needed a secretary who could handle administrative work and manage weekend tours. Our long conversation ended with me telling Mr. Kinney that I would start working on March 2.

On the first day, I followed Mr. Kinney to an office, where I was introduced to Mr. C. Ferris Miller. A tall and handsome middle-aged gentleman, Mr. Miller looked like a movie star to me. Mr. Miller had been serving as treasurer and general manager of the RAS-KB for the past few years. However, after chiropractic surgery, he could not walk comfortably and felt pain once in a while. He could no longer perform any work that involved physical activity. He had stopped going on RAS-KB excursions and was only taking care of paperwork he could manage from the office. I was assigned a small desk and a bookcase in the back corner of Mr. Miller’s office. As an advisor to the Bank of Korea, Mr. Miller’s office was very nice and big enough for an extra person.

On December 30, 1967, after ten months at Mr. Miller’s office, the RAS-KB council decided to move its office to a small space in the Research Institute of Korean Studies building near Seodaemun Intersection. I worked there for three years until the office moved again on December 30, 1970 to the tenth floor of the Korea Times Building in Anguk-dong. The new office was near the Jongno Police Station, and there were many surprise visits by police officers, who kept a close eye on all RAS-KB activities, including lecture meetings, during the Park Jung Hee period between 1962 and 1979. The officers would ask who was giving a lecture, why, and who the participants were. They even asked me to block the window, which was facing the Blue House. During that time, all foreigner activities were scrutinized and reported to the Intelligence Bureau. Once, I was repeatedly summoned to the police for questioning. I had ordered one hundred copies of the *Joseon Cookbook* from Charles Tuttle Company in Japan, and the police wanted to know why I had ordered a “Joseon” cookbook, not a “Hanguk” cookbook. Since the North Koreans called themselves Joseon, the name of the book had raised the alarm. I had to explain that the book was about traditional Korean cooking from the Joseon Dynasty. I asked, “What about the Joseon Hotel and the Joseon Ilbo, and Joseon everything in company names?” After that, they finally stopped asking questions.

From 1967 to 1969, most RAS lecture meetings were held at the auditorium at the National Medical Center on Euljiro 6-ga. The RAS-KB could use the auditorium free of charge under one condition: that the members eat at the Scandinavian dining hall operated by the National Medical Center. At the time, it was the only restaurant serving buffet dinner in Korea. During these three sweet years, the lecture meetings were always followed by members feasting on Smörgåsbord.

**Lectures**

There were several particularly popular lectures and performances that drew a huge crowd:

“Korean Patterns” by Dr. Paul Crane, November 8, 1971 (350 attendees)

Bongsan Mask Dance, April 25, 1973 (500 attendees)

This is Korea: film screening, August 22,1974 (360 attendees)

Gangnyeong Mask Dance, August 27, 1980 (400 attendees)

“North Korea: yesterday and today” by Andrew Buzo, May 27, 1981 (220 attendees)

“Changing Patterns in American diplomacy: implications for Korean-American relations” by Amb. Richard L. Walker, April 28, 1982 (320 attendees at Chosun Hotel Ballroom)

The most popular lecture meetings were held in the spacious auditorium in the Korea Times building while we had our office there. The RAS-KB office moved again to its current location at the Korean Christian Building in Yeonji-dong, Jongno-gu, on December 30, 1975.

During my time with the RAS-KB, I arranged lecture meetings and tours, kept membership records and communicated with members on a daily basis, sold a lot of books, and arranged forty-five annual Garden Parties. I have arranged a total of 2,075 tours and accompanied most of them. I never once called in sick to cancel a tour, even when I was pregnant. Through RAS activities, I met innumerable remarkable people who enriched my life.

I have had the privilege to collaborate with many wonderful people on many tours. Among them are Drs. Dan and Carol Adams, who came to Korea in September 1980 and left in June 2011. While they stayed in Korea, they led over two hundred tours with me. The Adamses devoted much of their time and effort to helping other members of the RAS-KB learn about Korean culture and history.

Mr. Peter Bartholomew has led over 60 tours over the last 35 years, including the Walking Tours of Joseon Seoul, Suwon, and Gangneung.

Alan Heyman led tours of *gut* (shamanistic ritual), National Music Institute Museum, and Bulgogi on the Han River and boat tours.

Kyu Yi, the last crowned Prince of Joseon, led tours through the Secret Garden, Changdeokgung Palace, and royal tombs.

Dr. Horace G. Underwood led church tours and the Incheon-Suwon Narrow Guage Train tours.

Dr. Zo Za Yong led tours to Songnisan and the Emille Museum, a folk art museum he founded.

My brother, Dr. Bae Kyung-Yul also helped with many Seoraksan and overseas tours.

I cannot list all of the 2,075 tours I have arranged and accompanied, but I am happy to say that they were all completed without major incidents. One tour that I cannot forget is the tour to Songnisan, Beopjusa, and Emillle Museum on May 1, 1982, on Buddha’s birthday. For this particular tour, 150 people signed up and filled four buses. I was eight months pregnant with my second daughter. My doctor had warned, “Don’t go on any tours, or you could be in serious danger.” However, instead of sitting at home and worrying, I decided to lead this large group to Songnisan. I found three members from the group to take charge of each bus, for there were no mobile phones at the time. Fortunately, everything went smoothly and worked out as planned. On this trip were the US ambassador and the German Ambassador, so we were escorted by three police cars from the park entrance to the Soknisan National Park, and then back out again after the tour. We had a wonderful lunch at the Emillle Museum, which was located right next to the famed Minister Tree, visited Beopjusa and returned to Seoul. The following weekend, I led another large group of 120 people on the North Han Valley Tour to Yuneung in Geumgok. About twenty days later, I delivered a baby girl. My late husband, Dr. Kim Kyum-gil, was quite surprised, to say the least, to see that I led all these tours under such conditions.

There were several island tours that I remember as having been troublesome. Ulleug-do was one of those trips that no one knew what to expect. Several times, on our way to the island, we were caught in a torrential storm. The waves were so high, there was water everywhere, and our members began to feel seasick. We were lucky that we could turn back and proceed to plan B, the scenic tour of Seorak National Park before we got home safely and as scheduled. In the worst case scenario, we would have been stranded on Ulleung-do island for three extra days, out of food and money.

On one Hong-do and Heuksan-do trip, I was waiting for Mrs. Park, who often accompanied RAS-KB trips and cooked for the group, to pack up to leave. The boat that we were supposed to be boarding in ten minutes began to move farther and farther away from the dock, with all of our members on it. The members aboard the ship began to panic and thought that clearly they must have been on the wrong boat, seeing that their tour leader was still on the island. We helplessly watched the boat appear smaller, and smaller, and smaller. Miraculously, a man in a motorboat appeared out of nowhere and offered to take us to the boat for 100,000 won. With his help, Mrs. Park and I were able to get on our boat to join the group.

There are more stories than I can relate in a few pages. For those who are interested, some more episodes from the RAS-KB tours can be found in volume 82 of *Transactions* from 2007, in an article written by Dan Adams, chronicling his twenty seven years of leading RAS tours.

During my time with the RAS-KB, I got married in 1974, had my first daughter in 1976, and a second daughter in 1982; I was pleasantly surprised and felt greatly honored to be awarded an MBE from the British Queen in 2001. my husband and lifelong companion passed away in 2009. After my husband passed away, I decided that it was finally time for me to retire.

My husband used to always joke that I married the RAS-KB before I married him. In that sense, I lived with my husband for 35 years, but I was with the RAS-KB for 45 years. During these years, my family has given me infinite freedom to spend my weekends with the RAS-KB, and I appreciate their generosity and encouragement greatly. My husband and mother-in-law, who have both passed away, were an enormous support in my life. My two daughters, who have grown up to be wonderful women, have also helped by taking care of themselves in my absence. Last but not least, I would like to thank all of the council members of the RAS-KB, past and present, who have offered me thoughtful advice and fresh ideas. I deeply appreciate all of their efforts in making the RAS-KB a wonderful organization. As I retire after forty-five years of employment at the RAS-KB, it is my sincere desire that RAS-KB will continue to inspire and enrich the lives of many others as it has done for me. I hope to see the RAS-KB thrive and prosper in the lives and memories of its members for many years to come.

Sue Ja Bae served as the General Manager of the RAS-KB, from March 1967 to December 2011. She is now the Honorary Manager. She read the above text as her Retiring Speech at a party given in her honor in December 2011.