

# Connie Mangskau: Socialite, Antiquarian, Spy

By MaryAnne Stanislav

Connie Mangskau was born on 25 April 1907 in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Her English father, Charles Bernard Ainslie, was a forest manager for the Borneo Company and her northern Thai mother, Kunkaew, was part of the Pakdee family. The couple had three daughters, Bea, Connie and Jean. In early 1914, Connie's father returned to England on home leave and while there, the First World War broke out. He joined the war effort and was sent to France as a cavalry officer. Although he intended to return to Siam after the war, he was wounded twice and could not return to work in the teak forest. Kunkaew was left to raise the three girls on her own, with the help of the Borneo Company's station manager, D F Macfie. She travelled regularly to Bangkok to visit friends in the palace, where she sold exquisite silk brocades of the north (*pasins*). This gave her an opportunity to provide for her family and visit Connie and Bea, who were attending St Mary's School.



Connie as a young girl in Chiangmai circa 1912

In 1922, Connie and Bea were sent to Singapore to continue their studies at the Raffles Girls School. At the beginning of 1924, Connie joined the General Hospital as a nursing student. After passing the General Nursing Exam in 1926, she married Fridtjof Mangskau, a Norwegian who worked as District Manager for Bruce Petrie & Co in South Johore. Their first child, Margrethe, was born in September 1928. When Grethe became ill with malaria, Connie returned to Bangkok. She was having marital trouble with Fridtjof

and was pregnant with their second child, Joan, who was born in Bangkok. During the next four years, Connie made several trips back to Singapore in the hope of reconciling with Fridtjof, to no avail. In 1934, he died of peritonitis. The couple had discussed the possibility of their children being brought up in Norway, so after Fridtjof's death, Connie pursued this with his sister and that same year, Grethe was sent to live with her aunt in Oslo. Joan remained with Connie.



Connie circa 1920

Connie settled into life in Bangkok where she was in demand as a secretary because of her impeccable English and charming manner. She was also a beautiful, demure young widow who hoped to find love and a new husband. Although many young European men were enamored of her, they felt they couldn't marry her because she was Eurasian. In those days inter-racial marriage was frowned upon. While this was the sad burden she carried all her life, it made her stronger and more determined to "Show them all", as she often said.

During the Second World War, Connie was making plans for Joan to attend Raffles Girls School when they heard the devastating news that Singapore had fallen. Connie feared keeping Joan in Bangkok, so she sent her to the *Couvent des Oiseaux* in Dalat, Indochina while she and Jean became active couriers and spies for the Free Thai Movement. Joan's sojourn in Dalat would prove to be a wonderful cover for them to visit



The Thai house at night

and monitor Japanese troop movements, then report back to Bangkok. Connie was eventually captured by the Japanese and imprisoned in Phnom Penh; Jean was taken prisoner in Bangkok. While their mother was able to get Jean released within a week, Connie was held for over a month. In the meantime, plans were made to bring Joan back from Dalat, smuggled to Saigon through the Japanese checkpoints in a vegetable truck. With the Thai Consul's help, she returned safely to Bangkok.



Connie and Jim Thompson at the Cameron Highlands on an earlier trip before he disappeared

At the end of the war, Connie worked as a secretary and interpreter for the Office of Strategic Services, where she met Jim Thompson. During the post-war years Connie and Jim became close friends. In 1948, she opened her first *Monogram* shop in the Trocadero Hotel, on Surawong Road. Jim opened a small shop nearby. At his suggestion, Connie began selling antiques. She became 'the' person people contacted to sell antiques, as she was extremely discreet and offered fair prices. For the first time, being a Eurasian had its benefits; Connie could deal with Thais as a Thai and foreigners as one of them. Bangkok soon became an international destination with serious art collectors and museums buying Southeast Asian art for their collections. Connie was the first person they contacted and quickly became the 'go to' woman in Bangkok.

Connie and Jim not only visited sites together but also travelled together for business. One afternoon in Ayuddhya, while taking a boat ride on the river, Jim became very interested in the teak houses he saw and felt quite sure he



Connie at the Thai House circa 1986

could build something magical. During a discussion, Jim convinced Connie that she needed a backdrop for her art collection and a place to entertain her famous guests. Soon after building his own house, Jim built one in Connie's garden, supervising the construction himself and later said that in Connie's house he corrected the mistakes he had made in his own. The floor plan of Connie's house, which consisted of four separate teak houses, became so desirable that it has been used by many architects for their own houses. *Baan Thai*, as it was called, became the backdrop for many movies and magazine spreads and amazing parties were held there. While torches lit the tropical night, an *ankalung* orchestra would play and on special nights, a troupe of Thai dancers would entertain the

guests on the lawn below. Visiting royalty, heads of state, dignitaries, movie stars and socialites looked forward to an evening at Connie's. Doris Duke was so enchanted with the Thai house that she had Connie send her one to re-assemble in Hawaii.

On Easter weekend in 1967, Connie's life changed dramatically. She had suggested that Jim join her at a friend's home in the Cameron Highlands, to get away from Bangkok's heat and the stress of opening a new shop. On Easter Sunday, while the others napped, Jim went for a walk. When he didn't return, Connie called Bangkok and contacted Brigadier General Edwin Black, commander of US Forces in Thailand, a close personal friend of the family. He flew down to join the search. Connie fully believed that Jim would just walk back up the hill and wonder what all the fuss was about, but as the days wore on, the sick feeling in her stomach grew. Something terrible had happened to him. She was always at a loss to explain it and for many years, she refused to talk about his disappearance.



Connie at the Monogram shop at the Oriental Hotel 1986



Connie the socialite at a function, Sir James Holt on the right behind her, Sino British Trading Company, Bangkok

Connie's business grew and so did interest in Asian art with more and more people contacting her. She had a way of endearing herself to everyone she met. Each of her friends felt they had a privileged relationship with her. An astute businesswoman with a kind heart, she quietly supported many charities, but never sought praise for her charitable works. King Olaf of Norway bestowed an award on her for her lifelong service to Norwegians. Each year, she would travel the world to visit family and friends. Her address book read like a 'Who's Who' of the world. In 1987, Connie's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday party was the event of the season, talked about for years afterwards. She was stricken with cancer soon after that and suffered for three years. True to her character's strength and courage, she fought bravely but finally succumbed in 1990.

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*MaryAnne Stanislav, Connie Mangskau's granddaughter, is an author, opera singer and stage director. She is writing a book about Connie. Please visit [www.conniemangskau.com](http://www.conniemangskau.com) to learn more.*

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