



- *The Story of Louis T Leonowens* -

Louis Thomas Leonowens, who came to Bangkok as a young boy and was raised for more than half a decade in the Royal Palace, became one of the most interesting and revered foreigners in the history of Siam (now Thailand). After criss-crossing the globe Louis would one day return to the country of his youth as a Siamese royal military captain, private timber trading magnate and eccentric hotelier. This is his story.

- *Raised Among Royalty* -

Louis's life in Siam begins in 1862, on the sturdy wooden deck of the Siamese steamer *Chao Phya*. It was here, while standing beside his mother Anna Leonowens, that young Louis caught his first glimpse of Bangkok. The two were bound for the Royal Palace where Anna would be governess to the 58 children of King Mongkut.

The tales of the five years Louis and his mother spent in Bangkok were recorded, and sometimes embellished, in Anna's own books first published in the 1870s. Many years later Hollywood brought the stories to the silver screen with *The King and I* (1956) and *Anna and the King* (1999). Margaret Langdon used this remarkable story as the basis for her 1994 semi-fictional novel *Anna and the King*, while Susan Morgan debunked some of the governess's accounts in *Bombay Anna* (2008).

Louis has just a supporting role in these sagas. As a bit player in the larger story his mother wanted to tell, he makes brief appearances and then falls into the background, leaving us to ponder whatever became of that young boy, who gazed upon Bangkok with eyes full of wonder?

- *A Wide-Eyed Wanderer* -

Before Louis had reached 20 years of age, he had travelled more widely than many people today in the age of air travel. This was no easy feat given that voyages were long and arduous. To travel from London to Bangkok required 40 days at sea.

Leaving the regal lifestyle of Siam behind, Louis also left his mother and headed to boarding school in Ireland. Soon, though, his sense of adventure took hold—as it would continue to do for the remainder of his life. He crossed the Atlantic to surprise Anna in her new home in Staten Island, New York.

Over the next several years he developed from an innocent child to a hard-working young man set on making a comfortable living. This quest took him to America's south, where he worked for the Land Department of the Cairo and Fulton Railroad Company in 1873, then back up north to Philadelphia in 1874, where he worked with a steamship company.

The following year, when whispers of a gold rush made their way to Louis, he returned to the land of his birth<sup>1</sup>, Australia, and journeyed to gold fields near the Palmer River where he joined the throngs of wealth-seekers, albeit as part of the mine's police force.

In 1881 he switched careers once again, and was working back on the land as a stock hand on Leonard F. Percival's station in South Australia. It is at this time that Louis reached out to his mother, seeking financial assistance for his return to America. Anna decided it was time for her 25-year-old son to take responsibility for his own life, and she wouldn't support him.

According to the book, *Louis and the King of Siam*, Anna's reluctant response was, "wise counsel to anybody but an adventurous wanderer with ambition and a sense of urgency in his system. The next thing that Anna was to learn was that somehow he had found his way back to Bangkok."<sup>2</sup>

### *- Return to a Changing Siam -*

In 1881, some 20 years after Louis first arrived in Thailand's capital, he found himself once again on the Chao Phraya River, approaching the city of his childhood.

Times had changed. Bangkok was transforming and modernizing. Year-by-year the city's foreign population was expanding, as were the country's foreign relations. Anna's former employer, King Mongkut, had long since passed away and in his place reigned his ninth son King Chulalongkorn, who Louis knew as a child.

Upon his return, Louis became a captain in the King's army, with the title of Grand Master of the Horse, and moved into the royal quarters next door to where he lived in his youth.

During his tenure he was given a mission that took him deep into north-eastern Siam. In January 1884, with an army of 200 poorly-trained soldiers, Louis set out. He was to protect James McCarthy, a man given the task of mapping the boundaries of the Siamese and French territory, from Haw tribesman who had invaded parts of the northern region. The mission was Louis's first expedition into the area, where he was to spend a large portion of his future. The trek covered hundreds of miles over grass plains and through dense forests where tigers still roamed.

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1. According to the State Records Office of Western Australia (See [here](#)) Louis was born here, though it is believed that he was "led to believe or agreed to pretend that he was born in London."  
2. Bristowe, W. (1976). Page 37. *Louis and the King of Siam*. London: Chatto & Windus Ltd.



When The Oriental Hotel documented its long history, Louis' arrival in Bangkok played a significant role. His "gaze fell on a small building next to the one with the French flag. 'Oriental Lodge,' the captain had said. 'Oriental,' the boy [Louis] murmured. 'Why couldn't we stay there?'"<sup>3</sup>

Louis did more than just stay there. Years later he was to own it.

There are various accounts as to how Louis came to hold ownership of The Oriental. According to *Louis and The King of Siam*, in his drunken haze Louis formed a syndicate, bought the lease and put his friend Franklin (Bill) Hurst as the manager.<sup>4</sup>

If the former account is to be believed Hurst held his management role until one day in December 1895 when Louis unceremoniously axed him by riding his horse up the steps of the hotel and into Hurst's office. This was typical of an eccentric Louis. Another anecdote that has been told over the years is of Louis driving his horse and trap into the dining room of The Oriental, much to the shock of the other patrons.

The record is unclear both to how Louis came into possession of the hotel and also as to how he sold it. One version is that in the 1890s Louis sold the hotel's lease to a syndicate and stepped away from the hospitality industry.

Regardless of the when and how, The Oriental Hotel hasn't forgotten its former owner. Within the tropical gardens outside the hotel's old wing sits a time capsule placed by the Louis T. Leonowens (Thailand) Limited in 1980. Its contents are to remain a mystery until it is opened in 2055.

Louis's father is also remembered for his time in the hospitality industry. In 1858 a young Thomas Leonowens moved to the island of Penang, a tropical oasis cloaked with palms and nutmeg trees, to manage The Pinang Family Hotel. The respectable lodging was the first hotel to open on what is now a popular tourist destination.

At the same time Louis was exploring the world of hospitality as a hotelier, he was also exploring the possibilities of life after Caroline. He had resigned from the Borneo Company in 1895, and joined the competition, the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation. It was during this time that he went to the St. Andrews Ball, a festive annual event in Bangkok that continues today. At the ball he met Reta Maclaughlan, a youthful blue-eyed beauty 23 years his junior.

### - Shan Rebellion -

In 1899 Louis and Reta were married and eleven days later they were on the move to Lampang in Siam's north.

In 1902 their home came under threat by the Shan Rebellion, a period of unrest between the country's northern and southern regions that forever shaped the kingdom's borders and the south's authority over the north.

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3. Augustin, A. Williamson, A. (n.d.). Page 17. *The Most Famous Hotels in the World: The Oriental Hotel*.

4. Bristowe, W. (1976). Page 88. *Louis and the King of Siam*. London: Chatto & Windus Ltd.



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