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# Case of the missing silk king: A deliciously baffling mystery still stirs whispers in Bangkok

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BANGKOK, Thailand—In a part of the world where mysteries are common and legends abound, the disappearance of Thai silk king Jim Thompson still ranks as a deliciously knotty riddle.

Some 16 years after he vanished without a trace in the Malaysian jungles, the legend of Jim Thompson lives on, an enigma that remains an integral part of Bangkok's city life and its commerce.

At the Jim Thompson Thai Silk Co., bolt upon bolt of the rich silk he made famous—generally considered the best in Thailand—is stacked in a rainbowlike display for the thousands of tourists and residents who flock to his company's only retail outlet. Other items, ranging from clothing to pillowcovers to napkins, bear Thompson's bold signature stroked across the fabric or on its label.

At his canal-side home, now a museum, tourists can view his collection of Southeast Asian art and antiques—one of the most extensive and valuable in the world.

And in the bars and other meeting spots of his adopted city, where locals gather for drink and conversation, Jim Thompson's name still comes up regularly to tantalize and baffle. The story has all the right elements: Fabulous wealth, powerful diplomats, royalty, rumors of spy activities, the mysterious setting of Bangkok and murder.

THOMPSON'S STORY began in a much less dramatic fashion than it ended. Born March 21, 1906, James Harrison William Thompson was graduated from Princeton and studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania before practicing in New York and enlisting in the Army in 1941.

During the war, Thompson worked for the Office of Strategic Services, forerunner of the CIA. He spent most of his wartime career in Europe and North Africa, eventually parachuted into Thailand and wound up in Bangkok after the Japanese surrender. After his discharge, Thompson, then 40 years old, returned to Bangkok.

He did some architectural work, redesigning the majestic Oriental Hotel, but it was when Thompson decided to turn his talents to the silk industry that he made his fame and fortune and assured himself a place in modern Thai history.

Almost singlehandedly Thompson revived the dormant Thai silk industry, revitalizing the craft of handweaving and at one point dyeing the fabrics in the canal by his house.

Thompson established the Thai Silk Co. in 1948 and within a decade it had become a worldwide phenomenon, turning out a singular fabric with irregular threads and nubby texture that found its way onto the backs of

such fashion plates as Princess Grace and Elizabeth Taylor and into the showrooms of designers in Paris, London and New York.

WHEN THE SOLDIER of fortune was turning entrepreneur, he also began assembling the art collection that later was deemed "irreplaceable" and housed in the solid teakwood home he had assembled from several smaller, old-style Thai houses.

Thompson, ruggedly handsome and outgoing, became something of a living legend in Thailand, hobnobbing with kings and princes, ambassadors and diplomats, as he wove his fortune from the silk industry.

At the same time, there was a certain amount of suspicion in the expatriate community that Thompson was still working for the CIA—something he never denied but never admitted to either. Friends later suggested he was willing to let the suspicion linger to protect the real CIA operatives.

Then, nearing the pinnacle of his storybook career, Thompson simply vanished.

It was Easter Sunday, 1967, and Thompson had gone with a companion to the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia to stay with his old friends Dr. and Mrs. T. J. Ling in their isolated cottage atop a jungled crest. Just a few days past his 61st birthday, he was described as being in good spirits, despite the prospect of an upcoming gallbladder operation, and had joined his friends for a picnic earlier in the day.

THEN, AS they retired for an afternoon nap, Thompson apparently walked away from the cottage and into the jungle—leaving behind his cigarettes and jacket. He was never seen again.

Despite an extensive search involving Malaysian troops, U.S. Army helicopters flown in from Thailand and several dozen aborigine guides, not one hint was found to indicate what had happened to Thompson.

Theories, of course, abounded. These ranged from suicide to a political kidnaping to robbery to some kind of dark intrigue linked to his cloak and dagger days. One suggestion was that he had been murdered by the CIA because of his influence on Thai government leaders—which didn't always coincide with American military strategy. Others theorized he had been carried off by a tiger, that he fell down one of the steep ravines or that he fell into an animal trap studded with poison-tipped spikes. Then, of course, there was the theory he staged his own disappearance—for whatever reasons—which led to subsequent reported "sightings" in such places as China, Tahiti and Singapore.

His close friend and biographer, William Warren, who spent a year chasing leads, finally settled on one of the more prosaic

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