By Carolyn Lee
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Teresa Hayes, a teacher at Wauneta-Palisade Schools, had entertained the thought for years about taking a mission trip. She thought she'd do that when she retired.

But, as a science teacher, she has the summers off. So, she decided to use this summer to work with Vietnam Village Health as a certified pharmacy technician.

Hayes left with a group from Oklahoma June 16 for Vietnam. She carried a suitcase of toothpaste, toothbrushes and mirrors.

Her fellow travelers included a pharmacist, a dentist and numerous others who were either "boat people," refugees from Communist Vietnam or their descendants.

The group hooked up with other medical personnel from Vietnam, and visited nine mission sites, from Saigon orphanages to the central highlands, to the ocean, to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, infamous during the Vietnam War.

The group first visited an orphanage in Saigon, or Ho Chi Minh City, former capital of South Vietnam.

"A lot of the orphans were dropped off on the streets" and had physical and mental problems, Hayes said. "It's hard to get served if you're handicapped," she noted, adding that medical personnel "just wouldn't work on them." They aren't "untouchable," but close, she added.

A dentist took care of all of the handicapped children who needed dental extractions and care, she said.

The group then traveled to Hue, where they stayed at a convent for four nights.

"They are unbelievably gracious people," she said of the nuns.

The group would get on a bus in the morning, with a priest who said prayers. They would travel to different churches, where lines of 200-500 people would be waiting for medical or dental attention.

The group would set up makeshift clinics, outside or in the churches, using tables and benches.

In the Central Highlands, one woman walked four hours to see the doctor and dentist, Hayes said. She was a victim of Agent Orange during the Vietnamese War, and had lost one child and had two with severe birth defects, probably caused by Agent Orange, that was used by the U.S. to defoliate the jungles during the war.

Coming from an agricultural area, Hayes was interested in the farming aspects of Vietnam. She saw just one tractor.

Water buffalo and oxen were used to till the ground, with fertilizing done by hand.

Hayes was amazed that rice, which is grown year round, was dried by spreading it over the asphalt along the highways.

Farms were "tiny parcels of land," she noted, with lots of "unbelievable fruit and vegetables."

Hayes, who was one of a few people speaking only English on the trip, learned that many people were "boat people," jumping onto boats to escape the country, only to end up in other countries or lost in the fog on the China Sea. They wanted to give back to their former country.

She loved interacting with the children, who were curious about her blue eyes and blond hair.

The South Vietnamese were “warm and gracious” to Americans, she observed.

The trip was very spiritual to Hayes, who is Catholic. The group would sing hymns in the Vietnamese language, which can make one word mean seven depending upon the tone or inflection used.

Mass would be held following the day’s activities. “I was not only honored to serve the people but got a lot out of it spiritually,” she commented.

It wasn’t just Catholics who participated on the trip. There were Buddhists also, but Vietnam Village Health is mainly humanitarian, she said.

Hayes pointed out that pharmaceuticals were left at convents for patients who need refills on prescriptions, for more continuous health care.

Hayes, whose eyes sparkle when she scrolls through her pictures, didn’t hesitate when asked if she would go on another mission trip.

“I’m already looking for another place to go next summer,” she laughed.

She returned to the United States July 8.