

A FIRST GENERATION FIL-AM LOOKS BACK

(From Life's Nokano Side)

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14 OCTOBER 2008 (REV 16.09.18/02)

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FOREWORD

First born in the USA of Filipino immigrant parents -- it hadn't occurred to me that those of us who have this unique heritage are anything but Americans, although our upbringing was somewhat unusual. This cultural phenomenon did not have any particular significance to me while growing up in California, until it became evident that those early Filipino immigrants, the "First Wave" of Pinoys and Pinays, are the lost generation, their experiences in this strange land having disappeared with them. And now mine, the "Second Wave" are the elders – Mánongs and Manangs – are a vanishing generation, whose life stories, like those of the First Wave, are barely known. This essay briefly looks at that void, through descriptions of some memorable events that affected me and my reaction to them, growing up as a Filipino-American.

Because this retrospective includes certain events, people, places and dates of the 1930s through the early 1950s and being a senior ("Apo Lakay") myself, I needed help: agyamanak unay/ maraming salamat to my sisters Helen, Elaine and Joanie, brother-in-law Rudy Quibelan, and sister-in-law Josephine ("Jo") Canion; cousins Leticia ("Tish") Ragsac, Francisco ("Frisco") Ragsac, John ("Sib") Ragsac, Juanita Ragsac, Arlene (Ragsac) Rose, and Roy Ragsac; friends Lily Bacosa, Frances Bacosa, Paul Bacosa, Mary (Mapa) Valmoja, Leo Escalante, and Corky Bueno; Mánang Sally (Cordero) Regala, and Mánong Gabe Baltazar; and historians Curt Fukuda and Ralph Pearce.

Finally, maraming salamat and heartfelt appreciation to Mánong Al Robles, poet and community activist for San Francisco's First Wave Filipinos, for suggesting and inspiring me to write this retrospective.

RVR, sr.

14 October 2008/16 September 2018

A FIRST GENERATION FIL-AM LOOKS BACK *(From Life's Ilokano Side)*

No more do I hear the young Ilokanos of my childhood..., the chatter of words pronounced so hard, sounding so harsh and loud. The voices of that First Wave of Ilokano immigrants, and their strange but memorable accents we used to make fun of, are long stilled but clearly remembered.¹ They were just in their teens or early 20s, when they cleared immigration, just off the ship, looking toward a new life, coming to an unknown, bewildering land, maybe meeting their relatives who arrived even earlier. They could not have dreamed then in the 1920s and 1930s of the legacy they were to leave, and if they were lucky to find and marry a woman (very few Pinays) in those days, they would have children who were the very first to eventually become known as “Filipino-American.” I am *truly proud* to be one of them.

ILOKANO KA?

All of my parent’s town mates, friends and relatives were Ilokanos – laborers, favored by ranch owners as hard workers, with no more than an elementary school education (but for one notable exception). Too late do we fully understand or appreciate how hard it must have been for them to make a living and survive in America, especially during the depressed and depressing time of the late 1920s and early 30s. My generation of Depression Babies realized in our senior years that we should have in some way honored them and preserved each of their life stories – for many of them who migrated here in their mid-teens, they in their own way also were “Growing Up Filipino in the USA.” For that First Wave Ilokanos, especially my father Sergio Reg Ragsac and mother, Mary Vidal Ragsac, this personal reflection is dedicated.

YOU’LL NEVER SEE ME AGAIN!

“... There were the four of us walking along the dirt road in April of 1924, from barrio Pañgada to Vigan, the capital of the Province of Ilocos Sur, me carrying a little bag of clothes and 180 pesos in my pocket, a ‘necklace’ hanging, locked, on my neck. The 180 pesos was the money I was given to start my life in Hawaii as a contract laborer in the plantations; 60 pesos each from my father Francisco Ragsag, my mother Eufemia Reg Ragsag, (shown ca. 1920; from Effie Ragsac) and my Ninong, Esteban Reynon. We didn't talk much, a 17 year-old doesn't know about leaving home, maybe forever, but I was going anyway. My father said he would let me go, but my mother didn't want to and cried when she first found out: ‘If you go, you'll never see me again!’ She was right; I never saw either of them again since that day in Vigan, Ilocos Sur, when I got on the trucks with the other young Ilokano boys for the ride to Manila....” (Biography of Sergio “Sharkey” Reg Ragsac, 1907-1994; May 1990).



¹ In the 1970’s I wasn’t aware of the “Luzon Indios” setting foot in Morro Bay or the “Manilamen” settling in New Orleans, who were the actual First Wave of historic times. My First Wave is composed of Filipinos who immigrated to and settled in Santa Clara County and San Jose, in the early 1900s, before the **Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934**.

With that decision my father in 1924, at age 17, one year after his photo was taken (Helen Ragsac Sanchez), started a long series of life events that led to him crossing the Pacific Ocean in steerage of the Siberian Maru, laboring in Hawaiian pineapple and sugar cane plantations as a “sakada”², living in wooden plantation shacks, meeting and marrying a pretty Ilokana in Waimea, Kauai, migrating to California to meet his older brothers Leoncio Reg (1899-1985) and Benrabe Reg (1902-1991), and having a family of two girls, Helen and Elaine, and two boys, Robert and Rubin (1933-1994). The mother of these children, Mary Vidal (1910-1970), ran away with her uncle to Kauai, Hawaii, a 14-year old who escaped a family life too harsh and cruel for a young girl of Lapaz Town, province of Abra, who only wanted to go to school.



A FIL-AM’S JOURNEY..., LIVING IN “INTERESTING TIMES”

Growing up Filipino in California would be a twisting adventure for us born of the First Wave, having one side of our psyche in a Filipino culture in their home-life and the other in a Caucasian educational and playground environment. For some of us in our childhood years in San Jose, we couldn’t have known that the culture of our homes was Filipino..., as far as we knew then, it was *Ilokano*, because that was not only our parents’ origins and heritage, but their town mates, social circle, relatives and friends were all from an Ilokano speaking province and barangay.³ Some of us thought that *that was* the Filipino language!

Even though we might not have been able to speak the language, it was where we started our lives – from the food we ate, and helped prepare (sure, I helped kill chicken, pig and goat, and learned how to save the blood), to the Filipino events our parents brought us to or participated in. One of these was a 1940 Jose Rizal Day celebration when my sister Helen, then only 12 years old, took part in a parade wearing a traditional formal terno dress, shown here with Dad (Helen’s collection).



The Ragsac children’s early environment wasn’t only an Ilokano community, as we were raised in a locale our parents called “Chinatown” in San Jose. It was closely associated then with but

² My father’s experiences in migrating to Hawaii and working and living as a sakada in the plantations are similar in many respects to the story of Bonipasyo as recorded by Virgilio Menor Felipe in “Hawaiian Pilipino Dreams,” 2002. The possible exception is that Dad said in his first day cutting sugar cane at the plantation in Oloo, Big Island of Hawaii, the labor was so hard he just cried.

³ Current usage is “barangay” for what was termed “barrio”

now subsumed under “Japantown,” with a dominant community of Japanese, but populated as well with many Chinese and a few Italian and Black families. Our “peer group” then was made up of other kids from our parent’s relatives and friends who lived near by. We formed a bond that was to last in many cases into our senior years.

DEPRESSION BABIES

In 1938 Dad and Mom (“Ma”) were pictured as a happy young couple who survived “Depression Time,” as Ma used to refer to those hard years. Though our childhood years were spent in depression time of the 1930s, I don’t remember ever being deprived or hungry. Although there were times that the Salvation Army or some other charitable organization would provide us with some help. In the late 30s, just before Thanksgiving, the Salvation Army unannounced would leave a bag filled with fruit and a turkey on our front door. Dinner was at times very simple – Ma would fry or boil one large fish for all six of us, cooking on a black, wood-burning iron stove. Dad would eat the head and the rest would be for us kids and Ma. Sometimes we would have tomatoes with it and of course always – rice and shoyu. Other nights it would be “dinengdeng” -- lots of vegetables, very little meat. My earliest and fondest memory was being fed by Ma “kammet” style..., her fingers. To this day all her kids remember being fed that way and how good the food tasted regardless of what it was.



Even though we moved five times we had always lived in or near Chinatown. The very earliest recollection I have of our house was one on North 5th St., just across from the Buddhist Temple. In front of that house, ca 1942, my dad posed proudly with his nearly new 1939 Plymouth and three of his kids (l-r): me, Elaine and Rubin (Ragsac album).



And in our first house that I don’t remember, at 648 North 4th St., I came into this world, Ma being helped by a midwife, her dear friend – Mrs. Iwo Kawamura, wife of Dr. Kawamura. I had always wanted to thank Mrs. Kawamura in my later years, but could not find anyone who actually knew her. As with those First Wave Filipinos, many of the Issei of the same generation had passed away, taking their life stories with them.

ILOKANOS “R” US!

As I grew up in the milieu of Dad’s cohorts, it was sort of a curiosity that all their last names began with ‘R’ and I thought that there must be some underlying reason. So we knew my father’s relatives, friends and town mates who were – Rabena, Racho, Ragasa, Ranches, Rapadas, Raras, Reasonable, Rebuldella, Reclusado, Reg, Regala, Rentar, Reynon, Rigunay. Dad explained it was just that way in Ilocos Sur; if your last name began with ‘R’ you most likely were originally from a barangay of that province. Later, hearsay implied it was probably a legacy of the Spanish government who, wanting to establish social order in the remote provinces required the natives (“Los Indios”) and their families to be identified and named. Ilocos Sur I suppose was assigned ‘R,’ the same perhaps, for Pantoc in Narvacan being given ‘C’ (so that’s why my stepfather was Cabebe, and his friends or relatives, Catolico, Cabansag!?).⁴

With a last name like “Ragsac” in elementary school in the 1930’s, I was to hear all possible variations and abbreviations of it up to and including graduate school. All the athletes in my high school baseball, track and basketball teams including the coaches, and even my home-room mates, called me “Rag.” My niece Cynthia Canion still uses “Uncle Rag.” These were not surprising labels as Dad went through the same things; Uncle Benrabe’s first born is called “Raggy” to this day, and uncle’s shipmates in the U.S. Navy called him “Rags.” One of my creative school mates used to call out “rag, sack, bottles and cans” whenever we met.

NARAGSAK!

But I endured all that with ease, and actually appreciation, as we have a unique surname. Maybe it is inherent in our family character to not be easily offended, for “naragsák” in Ilokano translates as “happy,” another nickname some of my schoolmates used. Actually the original spelling was “Ragsag” but Dad and his brothers changed it when they came to California, and told the family in Pañgada. It spread, and became a standard. According to Dad, anyone with that last name is related to all the others, even those who moved to other provinces. That was confirmed in 1985 when I made the direct relationship of two Ragsac families in Kauai, Hawaii, originally from Isabela, with the mainland Ragsac’s by using our family tree to connect the branches. The two Pinoy boys, Dominador and Primo, who migrated to Kauai in the ‘60s were verified to be my father’s first cousins, as Dad remembered when he was a little boy that his Uncle Alejandro Ragsac - father of the two boys - left Barangay Pañgada and moved to Isabela.

These were younger families, by so many years that it led to what is probably a common Filipino trait in familial relations. Our second cousins are younger than us by at least 30 years. Because of that age difference they respectfully address me as Uncle instead of Cousin, except for one family, whose children call me Cousin, and they are almost 50 years younger. And my dad’s cousins and their wives, who are also younger than me by 5 to 10 years, I call Uncle and Aunt!

⁴ One of our fiercest competitors on the basketball court was Rudy Caluza Calica (1932-1996) of the San Francisco FYL team, who became my good friend in our later years. We used to regale each other with what little Ilokano words we knew; I never did get a chance to ask him if his heritage (Caluza, Calica) was traceable to Narvacan.

What has to be a cosmic Ilokano-thread of a coincidence, my next door neighbor Jesse Blanco, whose mother's maiden name is Rea, found a relative of his back in the Philippines whose full name is Florencio *Ragsac* Rea. Jesse was told that the father of Florencio's mother is a Ragsac who Florencio says was a very religious Christian man. This had to be Diego Ragsac who we kids knew in the 1940s as Uncle Dick, before he returned to the Philippines. He is in our family tree, and we remember him in our childhood years as being extremely religious and a devout Christian. Pending further review, Jesse and I may be distant relatives!

A CHINATOWN CALLED "HEINLENVILLE"?

Every town with migrant Filipino laborers had their gathering place, where they would congregate, shop at the Filipino stores, play pool and cards, gamble, taxi-dance, and just hang out with their town mates, dressed in their fine suits. I vaguely remember it was Kearney and Jackson streets in San Francisco (Manila Cafe and Bataan Cafe; Julian's Pool Hall-merchant seaman's hangout; Babe's), and in Stockton, El Dorado St., where it was called "Little Manila." We'd stay at the Filipino hotels in Stockton and eat at the local cafes: I distinctly remember my uncles taking us kids to eat Pinoy food at a counter in Stockton (Lafayette Lunch Counter?).

My very earliest recollection of going to a store was in a Chinatown that I later learned was called "Heinlenville." It seems that in 1887 the original Chinatown in downtown San Jose mysteriously burned down. A wealthy German immigrant, John Heinlen, offered some land between North 6th and 7th streets, bounded by Taylor St. on the north and Jackson St. on the south, as a new location for the Chinese to settle. Naturally those early Filipinos would shop there for their vegetables and goods, as I remember going with Ma in the early 1930s, holding her hand as she looked over the offerings of the old "Chinamen" with their long queues (pigtailed) and black clothes. We kids remember playing on the dirt street, with sidewalks of wood, and trying to sneak into the "Joss House," the Chinese Temple, on the corner of 6th and Taylor.⁵

During that decade the Filipinos started to buy (some by proxy) or lease buildings on 6th St. where there was a mix of Chinese- and Japanese-owned stores. So that enclave we came to know as "Chinatown" probably because it was next to Heinlenville, which by then was in decline. Just as was happening in the other small towns, the Filipinos would gather on 6th St. doing the same things. I distinctly remember how crowded it was, especially in the evening and on weekends, as the laborers would come to meet and hang out with their gagayyem (friends).

A BARANGAY WITHIN CHINATOWN

With all those finely dressed Pinoy boys, my brother and I thought they must also have great leather shoes that need shining. So began our first and only money-making enterprise. Sometime in 1943, we'd go there on weekends to shine shoes..., for 10 cents, sometimes 15, or we'd get a great tip and it would be "two bits," enough for a double feature movie and candy! We'd solicit

⁵ I always wondered why it was called "Joss" until I found out that during the late 1800s, when the Chinese were working the railroads, the Spanish influence was still prevalent. Spanish churches were houses of God ("Dios"); others saw it as the same for the Chinese temple. And how would a White or Chinese imitate the sound of "Dios"?

shoe shines in front of Escalante's Pool Hall – where we could clearly hear the gamblers and clicks of the buttons and mahjong tiles, the rap of cards being shuffled, with cigarette and cigar smoke flowing out the windows, mixed with the clack of billiard balls and the frenetic exchanges in Ilokano – near our Uncle Ben's Ideal Laundry, by Chong's Grocery Store.

Our competition was from Paul Bacosa, so at times we would go across the street to Todtod's Philippine Neighborhood Grocery, or his family's (Bacosa's) Universal Café and Supnet's 5¢ & 10¢ Variety store (pictured next to each other, ca. 1944; Lily Bacosa). Little did we know that shining shoes for that much money and fun would be looked on fondly as we were to later toil in real labor!



I thought 6th St. was crowded, as the Filipinos lined both sides of the street, but for less than a block long, hanging out in front of the stores, restaurants, and pool halls, always dressed in expensive suits.

That is, until Dad and sometimes my uncles would bring us to Stockton (my stepfather, ninong, and “uncles” all worked asparagus). So there we were driving down El Dorado Street, where there were Filipino boys everywhere, packed and lined up like I'd never seen in 6th Street! In my mind's eye now, flashing back as a little boy, that wasn't Little..., it was *Big Manila*!⁶ In retrospect I would've referred to it as a true “Pinoytown,” or “Barangay Stockton.”

SIX TO SIX, BUT NOT ON SUNDAYS

All kids in Jr. High School looked forward to and enjoyed summer time. Not my brother Rubin and me! Without warning one summer in the mid-40s, or because that's the way Filipino father's looked upon the boys of the family as they grew up..., Dad told us we were going to work at his friend's kampo. This was after the War when jobs became scarce and Dad was out of work from the defense plant (Food Machinery Corp., now FMC) building amphibious tractors (landing craft called “Water Buffalo”), and from shipbuilding in Mare Island, by Vallejo. So came our first taste of stoop labor, staring at mile-long rows of dirt mounds. The three of us dry planted celery on what looked like a million acres of land, in Santa Clara where Moonlight Drive-In was to be later located. Rubin would lay the young celery stalks on top of the mounds, and Dad and I would put them into a small hole made by using a short hoe – nose-to-the ground stoop labor at its truly excruciating best! Then a Pinoy irrigator would flood each row as we finished.

⁶ Little Manila is described by Dawn Bohulano Mabalon in *Filipinas Magazine*, October 2003. Also see her book “*Little Manila Is in the Heart*”.

We didn't complain much, even when we didn't get paid; for we were helping our family get through hard times. This awesomely unique work agony did serve my brother and me well. That's when we labored in other kampos and our vertebrae-cracking experience helped us survive. In all that kampo labor, the hours were simple: six in the morning until six at night, with Sunday off. That meant we got up at about 4:30 am and went to bed at 9 pm, with no evening fun time. We wanted so badly for summer to end!

We did it all, or at least I thought *I* did: picking string beans, tomatoes, squash, bell peppers, onions and cucumbers, cutting and packing celery, up in a tree plucking peaches, picking apricots and strawberries (didn't eat many) and gathering prunes off the ground (didn't eat any). I even field-packed vegetables on a truck farm (Fourth & Bayshore Farms, leased by Manong Florentino "Tinong" Magno), with one joyful time I was told to drive the flat-bed truck while the Pinoys stacked the loaded celery crates! I was given my first driver training instruction:

"Ay sus 'Berto! Estay een de rrrrows en' doan rrrrun ober de silerry!"

Most of our generation worked in the fields, packing houses, or canneries..., laborers of the post-war generation, including the girls. Mánong John Quilinderino is pictured with four of them, ca. mid 1940s: (l-r): Helen, Dolores Escalante, Adeline Quibelan (1929-1990) and Dorothy Quibelan (1927-2000; Dorothy's collection).



Helen, Elaine, Rubin and I reluctantly accepted our parents having us work hard as laborers. But what Rubin and I did resolve was that we both were not going to end up as those Ilokanos, working an incredibly hard and thankless job with a bleak future, one that reached only to next season's crops and kampo. We were going to rise above that kind of life by getting an education..., maybe even go to college, earn a degree and find a good paying career. For that burning motivation unintentionally given to us, my brother and I owed our parents much we could never repay, as we both were to fully realize the dreams we conjured up as very tired youngsters..., on those dreary, hot days at the dusty kampo.

ACTUALLY, THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS "MÁNONG"

Many of us Fil-Am children had heard our parents address their older brother or older sister, or any elder as "Mánong" or "Mánang." In our childhood we heard it as just another name or means of calling someone. We learn later how important it was to address your older brother or sister by those terms, as a sign of respect. My father in his 80s still addressed his older brothers as "Mánong Leoncio" or "Mánong Ben;" and they were older by only a few years. Only much later

in our senior years do such things come full circle – now we are addressed by later young Filipinos or Fil-Am’s as Mánong or Mánang. The first time I was called Manong it brought to mind how, in middle age, we used to address each other that way just to imply that person was an “old man” or “old woman,” and then we’d laugh! And now when I’m addressed as either Mánong or ‘Po, I respond with “Barók” (my young man; I consider it close to the slang expression “My Man!”), or “Balásangko” (my young lady).⁷

My grandchildren (who are mixed: Filipino-White⁸) have two grandfathers; one called “Grandpa,” the other “Ápo.” It not only distinguishes me from my counterpart, but reminds my grandchildren in a small way of their Filipino heritage. They were also taught to address my male friends as “Mánong” and refer to my father and stepfather (both deceased) as “Ápo Lakáy;” they understand why I want them to use those terms.

I appreciate now the cultural importance for those early Filipinos to show respect, but usage we ourselves didn’t apply as children. Didn’t we all call our older siblings by name? We didn’t normally say “Hey, Older Sister!” Because as we were taught English, we knew there’s no such thing as “Mánong” or “Mánang” (i.e., equivalent term of respectful address for everyday use).

MY SMALL WORLD EXPANDS: FIL-AM KIDS IN OTHER TOWNS

I never gave much thought during my childhood years that there could be Fil-Am kids like us or that there was something akin to Pinoytowns in other cities. Some time in 1946, the older Pinoy kids talked about forming a youth club, made up of us youngsters who lived in or near San Jose’s Chinatown or whose parents were active in or frequented the Filipino enclave. It was on the 5th of November, 1946, meeting in a creaky wooden building in 6th St., that we finally got a group together. I vaguely remember all of us sitting around trying to think up a name for the club; somehow the name “Agenda” came up, something about things to be done and we’re the ones to do them. So was born the “*San Jose Agenda Club of Filipino Youth.*” The first officers were:

Albert “Corky” Bueno, President
Dolores Escalante, Secretary/Treasurer
Leo Escalante, Sgt. at Arms

The founding members [some of whom have left us (d)] were:

Georgina “Ginger” Abasolo	Paul Lagasca (d)
Rose Abasolo (d)	Julie “Jule” Miguel
Raymond “Ray” Arevalo (d)	Adeline Quibelan (d)
Frances “Fran” Bacosa	Dorothy Quibelan (d)
Lily Bacosa	Lillian Quibelan (d)
Albert “Corky” Bueno	Helen Ragsac
Dolores Escalante	Robert Ragsac
Leo Escalante	Josephine Rubio
Ramona Escalante (d)	Juanita Villarruz

⁷ Two of my Ilokano neighbors refer to my significant other as “ading balasang”! Ading: term of endearment.

⁸ Their parents are Robert V. Ragsac Jr. and Cynthia Ann (nee Reid) Ragsac.

Even though the older members were in their late teens by the late 40's, three of them had experienced the hazards of WWII, having gone in harm's way as merchant marine seamen in the Pacific Theater of Operations -- Corky Bueno, Leo Escalante, and Jule Miguel.

We had several firsts as an organized Filipino youth club, significant experiences that thrust me, and I suspect all the younger ones, into a much broader social and cultural event horizon ----

First Fund Raising Event. This was a financial success as we sold sandwiches at the Caballeros de Dimas Alang Malvar Lodge No. 7 benefit dance on the 29th of November, 1946. Proceeds were \$45.22 less expenses of \$17.

First Girl's Basketball Game. It was the Agenda Club versus the P.I. Knights; no winner recorded nor any information on the game, players or who the P.I. Knights were.

First Filipino-American News Column. In the Philippine Mail newspaper, January 1947, new club member Anita Estalio reported on Agenda Club events and sports activities. The column was named "Strictly Ad Lib."

First Dance. This was a formal event held at the San Jose Elks Club on the 19th of July, 1947, with the theme "Starry Skies." The dance was a success as we netted \$113.14, with many thanks to the FYA band from Stockton, led by Jimmy Tenio, that played for free! Helen saved the photo of our Agenda Club Pinays in their beautiful formal dresses...



The pretty Pinays of the San Jose Agenda Club of Filipino Youth: (l-r) Lily Bacosa, Lillian Quibelan (d), Helen Ragsac, Ramona Escalante (d), Dorothy Quibelan (d), Dolores Escalante, Georgina Abasolo, Adeline Quibelan (d), Rose Abasolo (d), and Frances Bacosa.

First Club Picnic. We gathered on the beach at Santa Cruz on the 12th of August, 1947, ate lunch, played volleyball and baseball. The tennis team practiced at a local court, preparing for a match with Salinas.

First Tennis Tournament. The first major sports interest of club members was tennis, not basketball. The tournament was held on the 31st of August, 1947, against the Salinas FYCS, with the trophy provided by the Filipino Community of San Jose. The Agenda Club Tennis Team was Rose Abasolo, Jack David-Malig, Manuel David-Malig, Dolores Escalante, Leo Escalante, and Adeline Quibelan, versus the Salinas FYCS Team of Sam Garcia, Virginia Garcia, Ramonita Losada, Gloria Maglenty, Sonny Majarucan, and Ray “Peppy” Raymundo.

First Basketball Game. The Club rounded up six players for a Sunday preliminary game against the FYA “B” Team in Stockton, March 1948. The “A” game was the Stockton Filipino Youth Association (FYA) against the Livingston Dragons. We lost but enjoyed the FYA hospitality and the chance to make new friends from the other side of the mountain! The Agenda Team was made up of Ray Arevalo, Jack David-Malig, Manuel David-Malig, Paul Lagasca, Rubin Ragsac and Robert Ragsac.

As we were too young to drive and didn’t own enough cars, the only way we could get to Stockton was with the help of the FYA members who drove down to San Jose, picked up the team and Club members, and then drove us back home after the games and dance (a tough drive, before the era of freeways). It was these Pinoy boys who extended a big hand over 60 years ago in helping us meet with and get to know other Fil-Am kids in the very early days of our Club. I’m not sure we ever did thank them enough...

Agyamanak unay/Salamat po, Brothers, wherever you are----

Eddie Aparis “Little Kanak”	Poaches Likong
Richard Aparis “Big Kanak”	Paul Mamon
Bob Asis	Johnny Mercado
Sal Braga	Sal Rico
R. B. “Sleepy” Caballero	Julio Samson, Jr.
Sam Johnson	Abe Valderrama

My recollection may be a bit hazed over, but some of these Pinoy boys had memorable characteristics. I never could distinguish Little Kanak from Big Kanak, as to a kid like me then, they were both big! And I wondered at the time how a Pinoy’s last name could be “Aces.” Sal had sculpted facial features that weren’t easily forgotten, a characteristic I quickly saw when I met his daughters Roberta and Lisa fifty years later. There’s no need to describe “Sleepy.” I never did find out if “Poaches” had a real first name. Of that group it was Johnny that struck us Agenda team members as the toughest and hardest. And we finally met a Pinoy who was shorter than most of us in Abe.

First Jointly Sponsored Dance. This was a collaborative effort of the FYL of San Francisco, San Jose Agenda, Mabuhay of St. Mary’s (Oakland) and the Silayan Club of Oakland. The dance was held on Saturday night, the 26th of November, 1948, at the Gold Room of the San

Francisco Fairmont Hotel. It was a formal event attended by all members of the Agenda Club, with the girls in gowns and the boys in tuxedos! A fair accomplishment for all us kids then!

First Sponsored Basketball Tournament. With the financial support from the American Legion's Diosdado M. Franco Post 714, we sponsored our first basketball tournament and dance on the 4th of March, 1950 (all Fil-Am basketball tournaments were followed by an award dance that night; which was a great social event if you still had the energy after playing three games in one day!). The classy new uniforms provided by the Filipino American Legion didn't help as we were quickly eliminated (thus saving our energy for the award dance). We received good press coverage from the San Jose Mercury News for holding an all-Filipino Youth Basketball Tournament.

First Basketball Championship. Our second basketball tournament held in March, 1956, in the San Jose Civic Auditorium. After nine years we finally won a championship by defeating the Salinas FYCS, Livingston Dragons, and the San Francisco Mangos! Credit for this achievement goes to Fausto "George" Abasolo, Hal Canion, Billy Catamby, Matt DeGuzman, Raymond Quibelan, Robert Ridola and Art Villarruz.

First Agonizing Frustration. In 1959, at Kezar Pavilion, San Francisco, we gave our best team effort against the powerful San Francisco Mangos in the Championship Bracket. We were ahead at the half, but the Mangos came back and beat us! The team members who had to live through this frustration were George Abasolo, John Alesandro, Hal Canion, Matt DeGuzman, Raymond Quibelan, Rudy Quibelan, Robert Ridola and Art Villarruz.

THE FIL-AM YOUTH CLUB PHENOMENON: COMPETITION, SOCIALIZATION, FRATERNIZATION

If one has to pick an outstanding feature of the first Fil-Am generation it has to be the Filipino Youth Clubs of the cities in the Bay Area and Central Valley. It was fierce, elbows-to-the-body basketball competition during the day where the play was tough and hard fought, and the fans mean and loud, followed by memorable social mixes at the award dance that night with a live band that we could swing to. The Pinays from the other towns always looked prettier, cuter! (I married one – Mardena Ambon of Oakland Mabuhay.) Most of us Pinoy kids knew of all the pretty Pinays in the other towns although we were too young to follow through. Most memorable for me though were the San Francisco Fernandes girls: Choling, Nitang, Margie, and Virgie!



Sometime in the late 1940's some of the Agenda Club members attended a dance in what was then the town of Alvarado. I remember the hall was just a wooden barn. But that didn't bother us as we had a fun time with a live band and all the young Fil-Am's from the surrounding towns of Niles, Isleton, Centerville, Pleasanton, San Jose and Alvarado. I was the lucky one (center) as three girls tried to embarrass me with all their attention: that's (l-r) Lily Bacosa, Frances Bacosa and Rose Abasolo surrounding me. Manuel David-Malig and Paul Bacosa are with them on the right. In the front (l-r): Fausto Abasolo, Matt DeGuzman, Joaquin "Jack" David-Malig, me, and Georgina "Ginger" Abasolo cuddled very close to Leo Escalante (Helen's collection).

The Fil-Am youth clubs of that era were a cultural phenomenon that is completely unique and most likely could not be reprised in our present day cultural and family environment and diffuse peer groups. Looking back with contemporary, socio-cultural eyes, it was those youth clubs that probably prevented many of us in all those towns from joining or organizing hard core gangs. As some of us remember, the competition was fierce enough and sometimes mean, on the basketball and tennis courts!

At the September, 2001 reunion of Filipino Youth Clubs sponsored by the San Jose Agenda Club, resurrected for the event, we honored the Filipino youth organizations of the 1940's and 50's that we could recall after 50 years when we were all active (not necessarily a complete list).

Not surprising that Stockton's huge Filipino population could support six clubs!

YOUTH CLUB	CITY	YOUTH CLUB	CITY
Agenda	San Jose	Mangos	San Francisco
Bards	Stockton	Padres	Stockton
Bohol Circle	Oakland	Rascals	Antioch
Cavales	San Diego	Royals	Sacramento
Dragons	Livingston	Silayan	Oakland
Eagles	Mountain View	St. Mary Mabuhay	Oakland
FAYC	Pittsburg	UFY	Stockton
Fils	Stockton	Val-Phi	Vallejo
FYA	Stockton	Vikings	San Francisco
FYC	Stockton	*	Long Beach
FYCS	Salinas	*	Rio Vista
FYL	San Francisco	*	Santa Maria
Hawaiian Teatters	Los Angeles	*	Wilmington
Hawks	Isleton	*Club known to be in the city but name not recorded	

SOCIALIZING BY A RIBBONED BOX...?

Who could forget the fund raising dances of the Caballeros de Dimas Alang, Legionarios del Trabajo, Sons of Cabugao, Lapogianians, United Sons of Santa Catalina, and the Filipino Community? Besides a live band there was the traditional and unique "Social Box" where there would be a cute Fil-Am Pinay ready to dance with whoever responded to the Pinoy who was waving a beribboned box trying to get someone to pay for the privilege! The proceeds were split with the Pinay, and as I remember the girls said it was fair compensation, except for the subtle undercurrent feeling and soft, unspoken stigma of being *bought* to dance!



At a Sons of Cabugao dance in November 1949 seven young Fil-Am Pinays volunteered or were recruited for a social box contest to raise funds for the organization. Fortunately for us Dorothy Quibelan, whose parents Ramon Acabado Quibelan, Sr. (1899-1967) and Diaga nee Macadangdang (1912-1967) were from Cabugao, kept a detailed album of her early years, so we can see how the contestants fared in that long ago social box, with a real Pinoy band on stage.

PICNICS PINOY STYLE...

What about the Filipino “picnics” at some isolated country park that were really a “pallot” (“sabong,” cockfight)? My Mom would cook, wrap and sell sinukmani (i.e., biko, but she called it “sinuman”) and lúmpia with Helen’s help (both pictured in 1942; Ragsac album). We youngsters helped too, but mostly enjoyed the outing, the playing and food. But the spirited roar of the crowd and crowing of roosters couldn’t be ignored..., so we watched and saw the glint of long blades, flurry of feathers and waving of hard money, in a backdrop of frantic urgings in Filipino dialects and accents. In my recollection of those long ago events, attending them was as normal as going to a theme park nowadays!



BROWN IS NOT WHITE..., NEITHER IS YELLOW

My childhood years in Jefferson Elementary School were notable for two incidences. In the first grade, I found a cute girl who liked me and we’d try to steal kisses in the bushes off the playground. She was Caucasian and very pretty, and I had this feeling about her that I couldn’t understand then.

In the other incident, my best friend who we used to walk to and from elementary school together was Japanese (Nisei, U.S. born of immigrant parents). It was on one day after a Sunday in December 1941, we walked to school as usual, but as we entered the playground all the white boys started yelling and screaming at him, and he started to cry. I didn’t do anything as I really didn’t understand why they were doing that. Both incidences are engraved in my mind, as if it happened last week. So emerged my very first inkling that if you weren’t white, there was a different way you would be treated; Maria T., my first crush, didn’t know that, neither did my friend Ed K., as we were just children—I turned 10 the month before.

I experienced the “usual” racial discrimination, just like all the Fil-Ams I suppose – subtle or outright,...., not being served or being ignored at the soda fountain or restaurant, not allowed to join a college fraternity, turned away by realtors when trying to buy or rent a house, and even in the California Army National Guard of the early 1950s, where us Pinoy soldiers were constantly called “Fish Head and Rice” eaters!

I had only two all-out fights because of my ethnicity; one of was with a white kid living in the neighborhood where I delivered newspapers in Vallejo during the war. He kept calling me a “Jap” even after I told him I’m Filipino. After several verbal exchanges, I finally had enough and we went at it. I ended up giving him a bloody nose. He later on apologized and told me he didn’t know about Filipinos. I felt sorry for him afterwards, as I thought his attitude was because of his ignorance and most likely his upbringing. But even later when we met he’d refer to me as “American” not Filipino..., not a problem, as I didn’t know then I was a hyphenated American.

But all of that was just part of growing up and learning how to handle the confrontations, disappointments and discrimination, and trying to rise above such unhappy events. All were placed into a larger, benign socio-cultural framework through all the years, until...

YOU'RE NOT FILIPINO!

My father, sisters and I were going through San Jose Airport in the late 70s, when a Filipina working the area asked my dad if he was Filipino ("Pilipino kayo?"), to which he answered "Yes" in English. Then she said something in Tagalog, but my father, not having the exposure to or learned much of the language or maybe because of his very poor hearing (no Cal OSHA in wartime defense plants), just smiled and kept walking. She repeated the words even louder, and then I guess in frustration she actually yelled "YOU'RE NOT FILIPINO!" repeating that a couple more times as we walked away, while I stared back at her, not believing what I was hearing.

No amount of earlier ugly experiences with racial verbal abuse came close to how that one incident hurt. I could go into a social psychology and cultural anthropology discourse and come up with reasons for her attitude, and excuse her behavior, but the incident would not easily be forgotten (or forgiven). But then it struck me..., she might be right – after turning 18 in 1949, I registered at Local Draft Board No. 61, where I was issued a Selective Service Card listing me as "White" (well, I obviously wasn't "Negro"!).

That incident gave me a thought: How do Filipino immigrants, who came in the 60s and later, view those earlier First Wave Pinoys⁹ (no Pensionados) and especially the Fil-Ams who don't speak the language? There was no Filipino language school as was a Japanese language school provided for the Nisei. Was that Filipina typical, a worrisome example of what was to come? The reverse was also a concern: How would I view the later immigrants, who are much more educated and sophisticated than the early Mánongs who played a strong part in my nurtured childhood?

WELL, SHE REALLY WASN'T TYPICAL

It wasn't until 1980, when I moved into my new house in the Berryessa District of San Jose that my concern would be answered -- about how later Filipino immigrants would view the First Wave Pinoys and us Fil-Ams, especially when they find out I and most of my contemporaries didn't speak any of the languages. The later immigrants I met were well educated, many holding college degrees, working in the professions and in high tech companies. None I've met were laborers or worked in the service sector (i.e., hotels, houseboy). My neighborhood is somewhat integrated: Tagalogs and Ilokanos, as well as Black, Caucasian and Mexican. My Filipino neighbors are from Camarao, Pantoc and Aquib in Narvacan; Santa Maria and Bayambang in

⁹ Linguists probably know of what I call a "syntax gap" where those early Ilokanos with just grade school education might speak differently compared to later-day immigrants who are college graduates and/or professionals. This is analogous to the Issei who, after living for decades isolated in the U.S., return to Japan to find out their syntax and pronunciations not only dated them but made them distinct from the natives (from a Nisei friend). This was also confirmed by my neighbors who said that the locals could identify them as returning Pinoys just by their speech.

Pangasinan; Bannuar, Lapog (San Juan); and Santa Tomas, La Union. It's only a coincidence they are all Ilokanos,¹⁰ except for one who is from Cavite. Most immigrated in the 70s and 80s.

In all my interactions with my neighbors and other later immigrants through my family and their friends, there was no hint of what that Filipina at San Jose Airport dropped on us on that unhappy occasion. I suspect that in my interaction with any of those Filipinos, regardless of barangay, province or dialect, they could sense clearly that even though I was born in California, knew little of their culture, and could only use few Ilokano and Tagalog words and phrases, that I was genuinely and fervently proud of my Filipino heritage in general and Ilokano in particular. That small thread may have been sufficient to overcome whatever attitude they might have had toward me (and me to them) and perhaps toward other Fil-Ams.

Well there was something else, like I knew about, grew up with, could describe and loved to eat Ilokano soul food – pinapaitan, kilawén kaldíng, dinadaráan, bagoóng, pinakbét, leddég/bisukól (“escargot” to the learned), marunggáy, salúyot, kalúnay, rasá (crab) guts, squid complete with ink, kilawén liver (balót not included¹¹). And I learned to eat “kammet” style – no spoon or fork!

REUNIONS, REUNITING AND REKINDLING: FILIPINO-AMERICAN TEENAGERS REVISITED

All of those activities, the camaraderie, club affiliations and mixers of the Fil-Ams as well as Filipino gatherings are forever gone and linger only as reminisces that our children would never experience, understand or probably want to know much about. But those long-dimmed relationships on occasion are rekindled whenever the aging Pinoy ‘kids’ gather for a reunion of the old Filipino Youth Clubs.

These reunions were unique, not only for reuniting old competitors and friends, most of whom had not seen each other since the early 1950s, but also for firing up forgotten teenage crushes, romances, unfulfilled relationships or denied love! In the Fil-Am Youth Club reunions held in the late 90s and early 2000s, there were many Pinoys and Pinays of the 1940s who knew each other or were early boy/girl friends or romantically involved but did not get any further. After those reunions I know of at least ten people who eventually reunited and became couples and several others that almost were (or maybe still in progress?).¹² In each case, the spouse had passed away and the survivor is a grandparent or great-grandparent, in her/his 70s and beyond!

When I first saw again the faces of the pretty Pinays of my teen years, who are all now grandmothers, and single like me, it wasn't easy to turn away the flood of romantic memories and urgings – and maybe see if I could ..., or perhaps it would be possible to...??

¹⁰ Two of my neighbors refer to themselves as “GI” Genuine Ilokano, or “FBI” Full Blooded Ilokano.

¹¹ There's a song titled “Sweet Balót” sung by Lanai & Augie, from Hawaii, in the CD “Pinoy Musika,” that my grandchildren love! And they know what balót is. Yes, I expose them to Filipino songs, even though we don't understand the words.

¹² It wasn't all romantic – I overheard a conversation of a Fil-Am Pinay confronting an old love: “I fell in love with you but you broke my heart!” She wasn't laughing and neither was he; she then quickly turned and walked away.

JAZZ AT THE FIL-AM REUNION

In all of the dances, whether for fundraisers or for awards after the basketball tournaments, the music was by a live band . . . , no DJ's or records, but a multi-piece group, made up of Fil-Ams playing music of the 40's and 50's. As we grew into our late teens, when we had the nerve to ask a girl to dance, it became important to know who was playing and what the music was going to be. In the day just about all the Fil-Am kids were very good dancers, mostly to swing and ballads. I don't even recall how it was that I got infected by jazz, but I suppose it was being exposed to the jazz bands at the dances. I loved to swing and learned the hard way . . . , my older sis and my buddies. But it became a hallmark of a good dance if you worked up a hot swingin' sweat or got to hold your favorite close and closer . . . , while slowly gliding over the floor.

Jazz was an important part of our Filipino Youth Club dances, so much so that at the reunion sponsored by the Agenda Club on the 8th of September, 2001,¹³ we hired Jimmy's younger brother Rudy Tenio (piano and vocals) and his nieces Georgiana "Georgie" (nee Ente) Leong and Stephanie "Stevie" (nee Ente) Wallage (vocalists) to provide the music – thereby completing a circle of 54 years. The theme – "TIME WAS..." – meant that the music had to be right for recreating some of the past memories for the aging youth club members. We even had the music professionally recorded live and sold the CD "JAZZ AT THE FIL-AM REUNION, 2001, TIME WAS..." as a memento of our event.¹⁴

In the CD liner notes I wrote:

"...Sure it was basketball, tennis or other events that brought our Fil-Am youth clubs together during the 1940s and 1950s. But, remember the dances sponsored by our clubs, or those Saturday night award dances after a tournament? And the music we listened and 'swinged' to as we talked about the games and players, and looked over the pretty Pinays or cute Pinoys who rooted for or booed at us? Much of what we happily went through in those exciting days that too soon became very long ago, is rooted in the music of the bands who played at our dances, ..., it was Jazz of that memorable era that fashioned one thread of our common bond. For many of us, even now in our 'gray' years, a soft ballad or a great swingin' tune can instantly call up from fuzzy memories dancing with that special gal or guy in Stockton, San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose..."

"We know that for a reunion to be successful the dinner could be OK, but the music better be for our kind of dancing! For the 2001 Reunion of Fil-Am youth clubs, the San Jose Agenda's Reunion Committee wanted a gathering to remember. This CD preserves special tunes of our reunion music, and for those of you who were there we know it will recall pleasant memories of how our 'TIME WAS' then..."

Many Fil-Am musicians who played at those dances were remembered for giving us kids the atmosphere to create our memorable events and romantic ties. In their honor we had set up a

¹³ We dodged a bullet for just three days later on the 11th, four airplanes transformed the United States.

¹⁴ An emotional moment was captured when Hamilton "Ham" Burila, who was recovering from a stroke, sang "Wonder Why" from his wheel chair in the middle of the dance floor. That was Ham's final performance.

display at the "TIME WAS" exhibit hall of youth club memorabilia, listing some of the Filipino-American musicians as known at the time (not necessarily complete, but updated as of 2008):

With soulful karma, the musical echoes of Fil-Am musicians reverberate and can be heard¹⁵

NAME	TALENT	NAME	TALENT
Michael Abing (u)	Sax	Rudy Honrado	Bass
Charlie Abing*	Sax	Mary Quevedo Hurst	Vocalist, piano
Alex Abing (u)	Trumpet	Willie Kitong	Guitar
Willy Abing (u)	Piano and trumpet	Rudy Lopez*	Piano
Clem Ahia	Guitar, vocalist	Ben Luis	Bass
Sam Ahia	Guitar, vocalist	Buddy Magapigal	Piano
Hank Albarico*	Drums	Darryl Magapigal	Bass
Steve Albarico*	Bass	Malicio Magdaluyo	Tenor sax
Al Baang*	Sax	Bill Mamon	Bass
Gabriel "Gabe" Baltazar Jr	Alto sax	Eddie Mamon	Drums
Danny Barcelona*	Drums	Paul Mamon*	Guitar
Santos Beloy*	Bass	Benny Marcello	Piano
Cora Beloy	Piano, vocalist	Nito Medina	Vocalist, guitar
Richard Benitez	Vibes	Michael "Mike" Montano	Piano, composer, arranger
Hamilton "Ham" Burila*	Vocalist, bass	George Muribus*	Piano
Benny Cabebe*	Piano	Cathy Neri	Vocalist, piano
Richard Camuca*	Sax	Joseph "Flip" Nunez*	Piano, vocalist, composer
Jo (Tenio) Canion	Vocalist, piano	Frank Panancialman	Bass
Matt Catingab	Sax, piano, composer, arranger	Cornelius Pascual	Piano
Ben Codog	Bass	Teddy Reyes	Bass
Carol Curaza	Vocalist, piano	Thanner Reyes*	Tenor sax
Hank Curaza	Vocalist, piano	Tommy Reyes	Trombone
Wayne DiSilva	Tenor sax	Anna "Lea" Rubio	Vocalist
Bobby "Wild Man" Enriquez*	Piano	Bob Tabosa	Bass, guitar
Ralph Enriquez	Bass	Jimmie Tenio*	Tenor sax, band leader
Billy Ente	Drums	Joe Tenio*	Drums
Vince Gomez	Bass	Rudy Tenio*	Vocalist, piano
Francisca Gorre	Vocalist	Primo "Kim" Villarruz	Vocalist, piano
Sonja Gorre	Piano, vocalist	Pepe Wasan*	Drums
Victor Gorre	Vocalist	* Playing the ultimate gig	(u) Status unknown

¹⁵ Roger Abing (arranger, euphonium), father of the Abing brothers, played in the Royal Hawaiian Band during the 1920's, as one of several Filipinos who passed for Hawaiian, in the all-Hawaiian roster, because there weren't many Hawaiian musicians then. This was from a talk story with Manong Gabe Batazar (alto sax), who also played in and retired (1954) from the Royal Hawaiian Band, passing for a Hawaiian (ref: Gabe at Ko'olina, HI, 18 October 2008)

ONE PINOYTOWN, TWO GENERATIONS, THREE MARKERS, AND FOR-GOTTEN...

The Pinoytown of my childhood now seems so dim, the faces of those Pinoys and Pinays becoming ever more clouded. The Filipinos and their enclave on 6th St. could just as easily been in a fast moving video clip, with the excitement of personal involvement rapidly becoming out of focus. My Pinoytown experiences probably lasted only about 12 years, from the late 1930's when I became culturally aware of and began to appreciate my heritage and our community of Filipinos, to the end of the 1940's when full attention was on the future I was to build in college.

...*One Pinoytown.* By then Pinoytown was in decline; many of the Filipinos, including the returning veterans, married and moved away or sought jobs in other towns. The restaurants, stores, pool halls and gambling dens closed, went out of business, or were just abandoned. Now, in strolling through that area, the wooden buildings with the Filipino stores on the East side of 6th St. have completely disappeared, including Todtod's Philippine Neighborhood Grocery store, Supnet's Variety Store, Universal Café, the other small cafes and pool halls. The buildings on the West side are still standing but replaced by other businesses or abandoned. As with "Little Manila" in Stockton, the scene now shows no sign of ever having been a thriving Pinoytown, nor traces of what was once a unique and vibrant community. Only four structures remain as visible, emotional links for me to that era, significant only if you knew of their past history.

1. The large one-story brick building at the corner of 6th and Jackson (adjacent to the current Kogura's gift shop) was once a thriving and noisy gambling den and pool hall (I knew as Escalante's) and the scene of a deadly knife fight by my Uncle Urbano Ragsac in 1937.¹⁶
2. Ken Ying Low's Chinese restaurant at 625 No. 6th is now abandoned, which also once housed the "Philippine Food Mart and Curio Shop" on the ground floor. Mary Mapa and Lily Bacosa are across the street from Ken Ying Low's (ca. early 1940s; Lily Bacosa).
3. Thankfully the Filipino Community Center of Santa Clara County still exists at 635 No. 6th and is active in serving the Filipinos in the county. At one time it housed "Manila Barber Shop" in the front part of the building. In about the late 40s it had also provided a place to stay for the elderly or homeless Filipinos, with small rooms on both sides of a long hallway in back that led to a community kitchen in the rear of the building.



¹⁶ In the 1920's and 30's it was proper dress for the Pinoys to carry a switch blade knife. Four decades later, sometime in the 1970's I asked Dad and Uncle Ben about that; they just said it was common in those years for them to carry a knife..., whereupon they then and there pulled from their pockets well worn switch blades! As a child in the early 1930s Helen said she liked to play with the switch on Dad's knife, so she can see and hear it click open!

4. Uncle Benrabe's Ideal Laundry at two locations, first at 665 No. 6th (shown ca. 1930; Ragsac album) and later at 611, are abandoned. The earlier site is a two-story brick building with art deco tiles in front, originally erected specifically for the laundry business and designated as a historical building by the City of San Jose.¹⁷ At one time it had Mánong Frank Bravo's Barber Shop in front and a small pool hall in back.



...*Two Generations*. The war years contributed greatly to the decline of the entire aggregation of Japanese, Chinese and Filipino enclaves that covered 4th to 6th streets, bounded by Taylor and Jackson. The Issei and Nisei families were forcibly removed to internment camps while many of the Filipino First Wave boys joined the First and Second Filipino Infantry Regiments of the U.S. Army or entered service in the U.S. Navy. And many of the others with a family or too old to serve worked in defense plants, Dad among them.

Many of my uncles enlisted in the U.S. Army, most ending up in the First and Second Filipino Infantry Regiments (l-r): Calexto ("Alex") Racho (with Helen; her album), Modesto Racho (ca 1942; Ragsac album), and Leoncio ("Leo") Ragsac [ca 1942; from his daughter Eufemia ("Effie" Ragsac) Crawley].



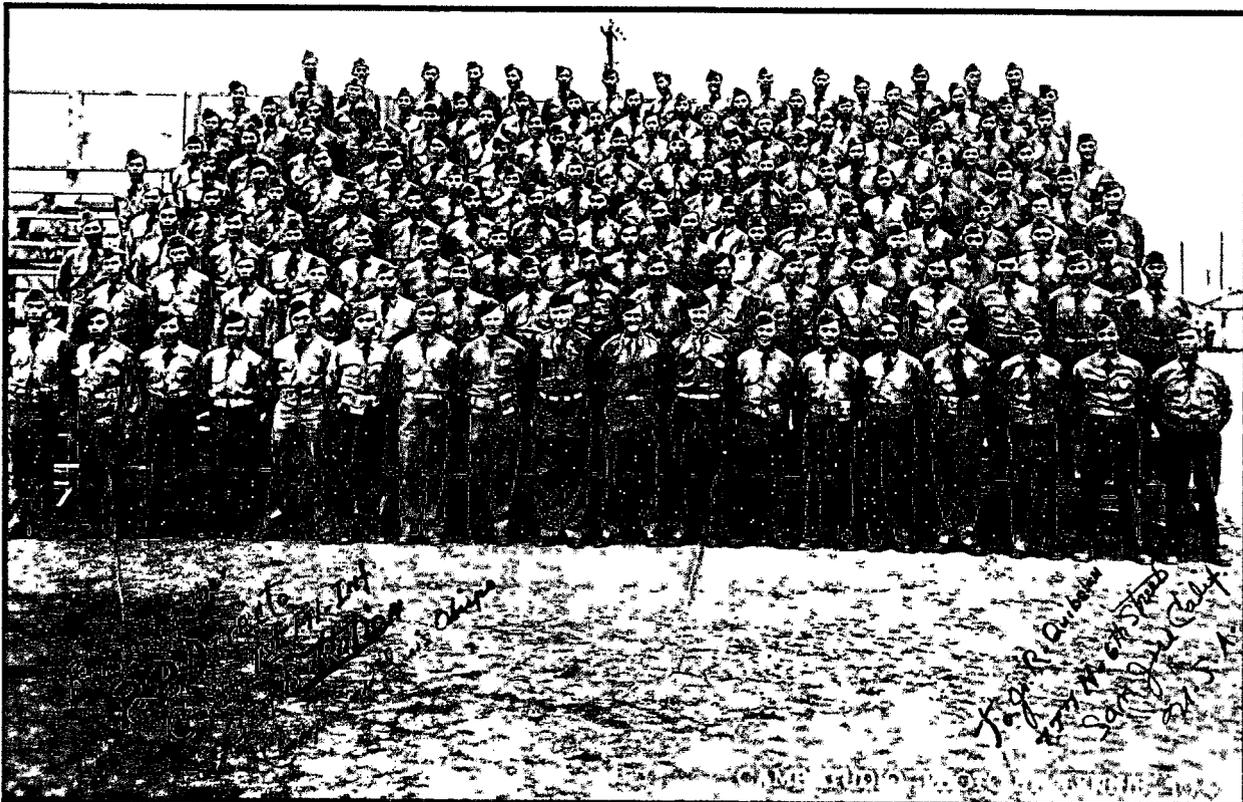
¹⁷ According to the historical bench marker in front, the structure was originally built for and owned by I. Tsurukawa. And from my Uncle Ben's memoirs he worked for Mr. Tsurukawa and eventually bought the business from him sometime in the 30's and later moved it down the block to 611 No. 6th St. The letters "EA" of IDEAL LAUNDRY CO. can still be seen on the second floor façade of that two-story brick building.



Uncles Benrabe ("Ben") Ragsac (left) and Francisco ("Frank") Rapadas Ragasa (1910-2006) joined the US Navy (both photos from Helen's collection). All of them traded their expensive and elegant Macintosh suits for military uniforms; it was a strange contrast to see them in uniform when they came home on leave. Both uncles were not only proud of their service to the United States on board ships in harm's way, but



equally so that they were not mess stewards! As with most of the Filipino boys, they enlisted in early 1942 and were honorably discharged in late 1945.



Some of those early Pinoys we knew are probably in this picture of Company I, 3rd Battalion, 1st Filipino Infantry Regiment at Camp San Luis Obispo, ca 1942-43 (sent to Raymond Quibelan, Jr., youngest of the Quibelan children, by his Ninong, Pancho Directo, in the second row, third from the right; Dorothy Quibelan).



My older sister Helen even contributed to the morale of the Pinoy soldiers of the 1st and 2nd Regiments by visiting with them and attending barbecues (lechón of course) in 1944 at Camp Cooke and Camp Roberts, Calif. Helen and Pacita Todtod along with other Pinays in traditional terno Filipina dresses were there to support the soldiers. Some of the lucky GIs were photographed holding hands with the girls in their formal dresses (on the right line Pacita is first and Helen is third; Helen's collection).¹⁸ Helen was later to be crowned "Miss Santa Catalina" in 1945, representing the San Jose United Sons of Santa Catalina in a parade in Stockton.

...*Three Markers*. The First Wave and their off spring moved on, letting Pinoytown melt away leaving no distinct sign of once having been a lively and boisterous gathering place. There are no indications that so many Filipinos ever lived in or frequented Chinatown. Fortunately the Landmark Committee of the Japanese Community Congress of San Jose is placing landmarks and memorials in the Japantown area -- one of which is a timeline of the Japanese experience, primarily honoring the Issei, on a long low stone slab. As the Filipinos were a significant part of the total Japantown experience, the Committee wanted to include an important Filipino event on the timeline. I was contacted for background information and recommended one major event - the formation of the Filipino Community Center. After meeting with the Board of Directors of the Filipino Community Center, they gave their support and we settled on the official year of the Center's founding. This was accepted by the Landmark Committee, and that event is now engraved on the granite timeline slab at 5th and Jackson --

"1933: Filipino Community Center Founded."

¹⁸ A related photo of them from the same events appears in *Filipinas Magazine*, October 2003, in its supplement, pages S1 and S6. My sister Helen is third from the right with Pacita Todtod on her left. Contrary to the implication in the caption they were not Filipina war brides.

The Landmark Committee is also in the process of placing markers, in the form of granite benches, memorializing events and certain buildings and locations in Japantown. These markers are first-person accounts or statements of a significant event or site, including a photo of the locale or building. A marker was placed near what was the Gran Oriente building, a Filipino Fraternal Lodge, on the corner of 4th and Jackson (in 1945 the building also contained the Arevalo family's "Traveler's Cafe" in the basement, serving Filipino food).

Thanks to the lobbying efforts of Ralph Pearce (author, historian), who is an advocate for capturing the Filipino experience in Santa Clara County and supported the Landmark Committee at the time, a marker commemorating the Filipino presence in Chinatown-Japantown was approved. This marker is to be placed on 6th St. near where most of the Filipino establishments were located. Courtesy of Lily Bacosa we used the original photo taken circa 1943 of the Philippines Neighborhood Grocery, owned by the



Todtod's, with (l-r) Lily Bacosa, Pvt. Supliciong "Phil" Caballes and Pacita "Pacing" Todtod. I made up a quote to be engraved in the granite bench---

"The immigrant Filipino boys of the 1920's and 1930's would patronize the Chinese, Japanese and Filipino stores on both sides of Sixth Street. In Summer 1943, I remember my brother Rubin and I would go there to shine shoes and they would be crowded in front of Escalante's Pool hall, over by my Uncle Ben's Ideal Cleaners, and also across the street by the Philippines Neighborhood Grocery, Supnet's 5&10, and the Universal Café"

...**Forgotten.** Other than the Filipino Community Center building, the stone timeline slab inscription, and the two historical markers, there is nothing to signify the once dynamic flow of Filipinos and their families through the now vanished Chinatown/Pinoytown. As in other cities with Pinoytowns, it is urban redevelopment, voracious developers and revenue-focused decision makers that not only destroy vestiges of the past but also wipe out and bury fragile memories, removing a once-living presence from history.

By a fortunate coincidence, this historical void is to be partially filled. In **late 2006** I was contacted by the historian/writer **Ralph Pearce** who was referred to me by his wife Emelie (nee Anacleto) for information on the first immigrant Filipinos. Emelie's father, Cleto Anacleto, was on the Board of Directors of the Filipino Service Center for which I was chair in the early 1970s; fortunately Emelie remembered that connection.

Ralph and another historian, **Curt Fukuda** (writer, artist) were involved in contributing to a book on the history of the Issei and Nisei of Japantown (Nihonmachi).¹⁹ They both were aware of the Filipino presence in the Japantown environs and needed detailed information and photos to accurately describe the Filipino experiences, activities and stores during the 1920s to 1950s era.

I agreed to contact some of the older members of the Agenda Club, who had lived in or near Chinatown and knew the immigrants, for a series of interviews, as most of the First Wave had already passed away or moved out of Santa Clara County. Via a series of “talk story” gatherings starting in **November 2006**, we were interviewed and video recorded, and our old photos scanned along with names, locations and dates. Curt is using some of the material for his portion of the Nihonmachi book. So the Filipino story and history in Japantown-Chinatown will be partially captured and preserved in the historical chronicles of Nihonmachi! We are going to use the remaining material for a book telling the story of the First Wave Filipinos in Santa Clara County.

ACTIVIST DEACTIVATED: HOPE IT WASN'T THE CRAB THEORY --

In the early 1970s I volunteered time to the Filipino Service Center of Santa Clara County.²⁰ This was a project sponsored by the Filipino Young Adults of the Filipino Community of Santa Clara County. (Actually, I think I was convinced to “volunteer” by Manual Naku, the principal activist of that group.) The Filipino Young Adults, organized in 1968, was at first a social organization, but eventually took on new purposes, as stated in its Articles of Incorporation:

“To plan, develop, and establish an information center in the Filipino community that will provide information to the Filipino elderly and youth in the areas of Social Security, Medicare, Manpower Referral, Housing and Legal Aid.

“To plan, develop and establish a service center in the Filipino Community that will provide service to the Filipino elderly and youth in the areas of counseling (education and family), recreational activities, education and news media.”

Similar to many organizations as ours, the major impediment was funding; much time was spent writing proposals and attending meetings with the representatives of funding agencies. The funds were needed to help start up the activities stated in the Articles. We did some outreach to Filipino organizations we knew about to obtain their perspectives on the needs of the community, including newly arrived immigrants. In 1975 we identified approximately 30 fraternal/Masonic, social, and business organizations in the county. We weren't very successful in getting grants; I suspected then it was because we, as a less-than-visible minority group, were not well recognized nor a political force as other minorities. That appears to be true to some extent today, witness the emergence and strength of the Vietnamese community in San Jose relative to the Filipinos.

¹⁹ In the small world of Japantown/Chinatown other coincidences abound. During my Jr. High School and High School years I patronized a barber shop owned by John (Takeo or “Tak”) Fukuda, Curt's uncle. It was Tak who told me that after that awful Sunday in 1941 he was pounced on by a group of white boys in Salinas; but he was saved... by local Filipino boys! Tak served with the all-Nisei 442nd Regimental Combat Team of WWII.

²⁰ The Service Center was somewhat similar in purpose to the then “Sandigan,” Filipino Newcomers Service Center of San Francisco.

How Could We Unify? Eventually I was named chairman of the Planning and Evaluation group. Over a series of meetings I noted that in order for us to obtain financial support we must find a way for all the Filipino organizations to become unified for at least addressing issues affecting Filipinos before the local politicians and funding agencies. It became evident after a while that we needed something even more basic than that as an acceptable focal point to avoid the implication that any of the organizations would relinquish independence.

We developed the concept of having our organizations to, at the very least, coordinate their activities whatever they may be - dances, picnics, fund raisers, or political, to minimize conflicts, allowing more of us to support them, and to present a unified front when taking on socio-political issues affecting Filipinos in the county. We met with many organizations and presented the idea; all were receptive and we were able to have some of their representatives or officers attend a series of meetings to organize and carry out a "Filipino Coordinating Council." Although we at first did get commitments of support, it was not as successful as envisioned in either coordinating or achieving the real objective of becoming united for political purposes.

It Was a Good Try. My personal perspective is that some representatives may have perceived the Coordinating Council as an umbrella group, maybe requiring officers, a chairman, or even an executive committee, that might cause member organizations to sense a loss of control or independence. And there was the issue of who was to be on the Council and thereby apparently wield *control*. That brought to mind the inherent difficulty in organizing a group of people, let alone organizations, to band together for a commonly accepted good or for a specific issue.

Maybe the Old Manongs Were Right. What I thought might be the underlying cause was the concern (real or imagined) that someone else would achieve what another could not, so support is withheld, or at worse, attempts are made to degrade the other. It was an unhappy thought that partly confirmed what some of the Mánong Generation said of their own – in a group setting, whether socio-economic or organizational, as soon as someone appears to be getting ahead or rising in social, financial or other commonly accepted measured status, someone would try to bring them down. The analogy is a tub full of crabs trying to get out..., they are climbing over each other. So ended my first and only small attempt as an activist for the community – I deactivated my role, mostly because of my inexperience in social activism, group dynamics and working with diverse collectives.

I believe the need for true community-wide Filipino-American unity and *hard-core* solidarity still exists, but *maybe* not as dire as it was 35 years ago, for now there are a multitude of organizations that support Filipinos, from preserving their heritage in America to confronting hard social and political issues. The impetus nationwide for Filipino organizations to band together is exemplified by the National Federation of Filipino-American Associations.

THE VANISHING “GENERASIANS” – THE FIRST WAVE PASSES

I suppose in a retrospective as this I view my heritage in a different light than when I was actually living it. So it's no surprise to find there are many things I could have done differently and maybe changed. The part that relates to growing up as a Filipino born in the USA I now find to be important is that we, the first Fil-Ams, did not truly know or understand the ordeals, agonies, hardships and disappointments our parents endured and overcame. So now we have to read some books and look at videos of that generation to understand, maybe confirm, and relive our memories of their immigration stories, and what they did for themselves and ultimately for us Fil-Am's. And this is probably the same, but more so, for the children of the Fil-Ams, who may not have had the first hand, living experience with the First Wave Mánongs.



One of the significant events I remember that was so important to our now-vanished First Wave Pinoys and Pinays was the celebration of Philippines Independence Day, originally set as the 4th of July 1946. In that long-ago event we participated in a parade complete with a float from the Filipino Community with our moms dressed in terno gowns (Ragsac album). I don't know the first names of my mother's peers as we *always* addressed them as Mrs. (“misis”) to this day.

IF YOU WAIT TO CAPTURE YOUR FAMILY'S HISTORY...

It was in 1990 that I finally took the time to interrogate my father on his family and immigration. My mother had already passed away 20 years earlier; she had very few memorable events of her childhood, just that she was extremely unhappy in Abra, running away when she was only 14. The family tree of the Ragsac's I made up included Dad's family in Barangay Pañgada, Santa Catalina, but is devoid of my mother's history – she wouldn't talk much about her past in Abra. I

thought then that when I was older I would specifically ask about her life history; but leukemia took her, at only age 60, leaving just her name, pictures and vague memories of her short life.

Fortunately, over some months I was able to write Dad's biography, up to the late 1940s; but a heart attack closed his life's book in 1994 and the rest of his story is untold. His incomplete biography and the family tree are important to us as it is a small reminder of our Filipino heritage that all succeeding generations of Ragsac's and their offspring can reach back by reading his story and viewing the old photos. His was only one of many personal stories and family histories that we should've captured, including my mother's, not only for genealogy purposes but also to save the memory of those early Filipinos who have all now passed.

A FILIPINO UNIVERSITY GRADUATE HAS NO REGRETS

Of that group of Filipinos who settled in San Jose or Santa Clara County, three survived to an old age; who we called "lakay" (old man): Esteban Cabebe Catolico (1911-2016) and his older brother Mariano Cabebe Catolico (1909-2009) who immigrated in 1928, (known to us kids then as "Teddy Darling"), and their cousin, my stepfather Dalmacio (Dan) Laya Cabebe (1914-2008). All three were from Barangay Pantoc, Narvacan. Dan, who immigrated in 1930, passed away a few months short of 94 years, and Mariano 12 months later at 100 years, leaving his brother Esteban at 105,²¹ as the last of the pre-Tydings-McDuffie Act immigrants in the county. Other than my father, Lakay Mariano is the lone member who we were fortunate enough to video-record his life story.²²

The three lodge brothers remained close, life long cohorts and active in the Caballeros de Dimas Alang, Malvar Lodge No. 7. In the late 1940s they attended a Dimas Alang dinner – (l-r) Lakay Esteban, Lakay Mariano wearing a Barong Tagalog, my mom, Mary Cabebe, in terno gown, and Lakay Dan Cabebe (Ragsac album).



Of the First Wave Ilokanos in my small world, most I knew were laborers, farm hands or service sector workers who had only an elementary school, or maybe a Junior High equivalent education²³ -- 6th grade for my father, none for my mother (although not formally educated she could easily converse in Tagalog, Visayan and English, besides Ilokano).

²¹ Lakay Esteban celebrated his 105th birthday on 11 November 2016 and passed away in January 2017.

²² We discovered that Apollonio Undajon, one of only three or four Pinoys who actually owned a ranch in Santa Clara County and was one of my father's friends, has a written biography.

²³ The possible exception that I knew of as a child was Ninong Eddie Monforte, who was called "Cabesa" (Spanish for "head") because he was a teacher in the Philippines, but just a field laborer in California.

Lakay Mariano is unique not only for his longevity but, unlike his gaggayem (friends), he decided to go to university and study for a degree. So he applied to and was accepted at the University of California, Berkeley, graduating in 1935 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History, and going on to graduate school there to earn a Master of Arts degree in History in 1937. He is a proud member of UC Alumni, even though in his school years he had plenty of room in lecture hall, for no white students would sit near him.

He was an extraordinary man, not only because of his struggles, degrees and longevity, but also for his still sharp memory, being able to recall details of Pantoc, family members, immigrating, starting life in the USA, his gagayem, attending Cal, his Filipino UC class mates (all of whom returned to the Philippines), meeting his wife Isabel (Laur, Nueva Ecija), all the while naming dates, places and people. He proudly told us that all three of his children hold college degrees, including his wife (Manila Central University, 1951). He is content and happy with how his life played out, with no regrets of growing up as a Filipino in the U.S., except for one, the same probably as others with a university education in the 1930s who were not white.

His dream was to teach history, the subject he loved, but he could not get a job in his chosen field of study or even work in an office, supposedly because he was not a U.S. citizen, but he suspects because he was brown. He ended up, Master's degree in hand, as the other Filipino boys at that time, working variously as a houseboy, cook, farm laborer, and even as a contractor for other Filipino laborers. Of us Fil-Ams who went to college, we fortunately did not have to endure that kind of rejection; although that doesn't mean there was no discrimination in our working and everyday lives. Lakay Mariano was a pioneer in that respect, but probably wasn't recognized as such in the day or given a tribute for his accomplishments. The preceding is my brief acknowledgement for him.

For all the other First Wave Pinoys, I made one small personal, private effort....

“AGYAMANAK UNAY ITI SAAN NGA....”

When my stepfather Lakay Dan passed away I was asked by my stepmother Editha (Laoag, Ilocos Norte) to give the eulogy on behalf of her, his daughter (my half-sister Alice Joan) and his grandchildren (Erik and Treven Regala, Lisha Guin), and great grandchildren. I made up a detailed eulogy and having sadly done this before for my family (my father – it was just too difficult to do one for my Mom, – kabsát (brother) Rubin, Uncle Ben Ragsac and his wife, Aunt Mary, Uncle Frank Ragasa), my gaggayem of many years (Dixon Campos, Rudy Calica, Harold “Hal” Canion, Matt DeGuzman, Paul Lagasca, Larry Ng, Rudy Tenio)²⁴ and my buddies (Richard Titus, Alonzo Torres, Leon Jackson), it was easy to briefly chronicle his life story.

Then I thought, he is the next to the last of my father's “Mánong Generation” who had passed away years earlier and, in reflection, I felt he and his generation should be remembered. The only

²⁴ Campos: SF Mangos; Calica: SF FYL; Canion, DeGuzman, Lagasca: SJ Agenda; Ng: “honorary Pinoy” (father owned Ken Ying Low); Tenio: jazz piano, vocals (for Rudy and his nieces Georgie and Stevie, I produced their jazz CD “A Night at Wine & Roses” featuring Gabe Baltazar, Noel Jewkes, Clem Ahia, John Heard and Paul Distel).

thing I could think of at the time was to present a comment directly to Lakay Dan in Ilokano, and in a spiritual way that would represent for me a small tribute to those early Manongs.

After I was to present the detailed eulogy in English, I would then give my short talk addressed to him in Ilokano. It was only five short sentences, translated by my neighbor Jesse, who is also from Narvacan as Lakay Dan. The English part went OK with only a few chokes (actually a hard one when I mentioned my Mom, his first wife), and then I started my eulogy in Ilokano, which I had memorized and practiced in my best imitation of Ilokano I heard over the years.

I looked over the audience, filling that large chapel to standing room clear to the back wall, at a fearsome brown sea of staring Filipino faces, practically all Ilokanos..., and went into brain lock! I ended up reading the talk and stumbled over some of the tongue warping words I had so easily pronounced in practice. But I was driven by the thought that this was for those Ilokanos who are present in spirit, and completed it as clearly and firmly as I could. I knew their spirits would appreciate the opening line that could have been meant for any one of them, especially my father Sergio (who I wished I had done the same for his eulogy)...

“Agyamanak unay iti saan nga nagpatinga nga ayat mo nga Ama, Lolo, ken maysa nga Asawa.”

“I thank you very much for being a loving and devoted father, grandfather and husband.”²⁵

THE FIRST FIL-AM’S BECOME THE VANISHING GENERATION ...

Our generation, the first to be born in America of Filipino parents, nurtured and raised in a Filipino household, was educated and socially embedded in the American culture. Thus, we became the link, the “Bridge Generation,” between the early Filipino immigrants and our children who did not experience first-hand the transplanted 1900s Filipino culture that was immersed in a new and strange environment that at times made our identification unique, but somewhat hazy and difficult to clearly define. We knew who we were inside our peer group, or within the many Fil-Am youth clubs and Filipino organizations, but struggled to assimilate outside it. The American social and economic environment, I suppose, didn’t really know how to deal with us except maybe with discrimination and condescension (a stepchild of “tolerate”).

In spite of all that, the Fil-Am’s I knew of must have seen a bright future in America, to be achieved with our own energies, talents and ambitions, not to be constrained with any self-imposed stigma of being “victims.” In retrospect, maybe I saw or wanted to believe that promise in us at our dances and youth club events, and maybe even in the faces of some of our youthful friends of the now vanishing Fil-Am generation from Stockton ...

²⁵ It was another sad event when Lakay Mariano Catolico “Teddy Darling” passed away in January 2009. I used some of what was written here for him in the eulogy and for a short tribute that was distributed at his viewing.



With help from my sis-in-law Josephine “Jo” (nee Tenio, formerly Ente) Canion and Corky Bueno, we see pretty Rose “Gussie” Guselga (d) flanked in the front row by (l-r): Willie Selim (d) and Eddie Araw, then Johnny Rico (d) and Albert “Al” Florita, backed up by (l-r): David Rico, Alfred “Woody” Nava (d), Manuel Marcigan, Mateo Florita (d), Johnny Mercado (d), Salvadore “Sal” Braga (d), Larry Ravella, and Jo’s brother Joe Tenio (d) (ca 1945; Helen).

NOW THAT I’LL SOON BE APO LAKAY....

My sisters and my brother and I were probably just like the other Fil-Ams – all graduated high school, many went to college, got a good job, married, had children and grandchildren, some from mixed marriages, but all of traceable Filipino Heritage. In my family tree the relationships are Caucasian, Guamanian, Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Tagalog, and even Ilokano! I and other Fil-Ams, I suppose, still have one side of our consciousness implanted from a Filipino family childhood, and the other in the Caucasian environment that we grew up in and lived our lives. We all now are the Mánongs and Mánangs to our children and Ápo and Ápo Lakáy to their children, even if they don’t know it, or use the terms, or understand the lineage.

The Fourth Wave, e.g., my grandchildren (Jacob, Jordan and Abigail), if we can call them that as the “waves” are dissipating, are fully assimilated, acculturated, and Americanized, maybe kept aware of their Filipino heritage only by word of mouth and conversation with their grandparents and great-grandparents on the Filipino side. Our Ragsac family tree clearly shows that trend, to the point that the grandchildren and great-grandchildren can trace their Filipino blood-lineage

only by looking at the family tree. Otherwise succeeding generations will have only a vague idea of what their Filipino heritage is and what the original Fil-Ams were about.

In some way, this retrospective and others like it I hope will make a little more visible and bestow a small bit of living presence to the “Invisible Generation” of the first Fil-Ams. So in addition to viewing faded photos, and reading textual bites of our generation, there will be some later generation of ours, interested in those first Fil-Ams, who will read such retrospectives, and perhaps not make the same error I did, in not fully capturing and understanding the first-hand, living stories of the previous generation. If that doesn’t happen, then our unique Fil-Am generation will truly be invisible and forgotten!

Our children’s generation, a diffuse and diverse peer group, unlike those of us who were born and raised in or near a “Pinoytown,” have only a passing knowledge of their Filipino heritage, unless their parents “talked story” of their lineage. That includes having them understand the story of the First Wave, which is even more vague and distant now, just as us Fil-Am children knew then very little about the Philippine Islands, its history and that of its first immigrants.

Throughout all of the life events and experiences I went through, growing up as a Filipino in California, there were many ways I was able to reconcile the “Fil” and the “Am” and bond them together so they would make social/cultural sense, a beneficial symbiosis. That’s because I was given a conceptual key...

A LIFE SCRIPT FROM THE HEART

Our Uncle Benrabe considered himself a loyal American, even though he was a “National”²⁶ when he joined the U.S. Navy in 1942. He refused to be a mess steward like the other Filipino and Black boys, and wanted to serve the United States rather than naval officers. He achieved a Storekeeper’s rating in the then segregated service. Soon after he was honorably discharged, when he was living with us, just as uncles Alex and Frank also stayed with us for a while after they were honorably discharged, we were talking about his experiences in the 30’s and in the Navy. I asked how he felt about the discrimination he went through and how he was able to rise above it. He related many stories and reasons, but only one stuck:

He said: “Bouey...” (Every first born male of a Filipino family must’ve been called “Boy” and with an Ilokano accent it comes out something like “Bouey,” my nickname in my family to this day!).

So he said: “Bouey: luke at my eskeen – brrrown; luke at my blahd – Ilokano; luke at my hearrrt – Amerreekahn!”

I have those same loyalties and pride, in ascending priority order of importance.

RVR, sr.

²⁶ Some of the Filipino immigrants had such identity cards as the Philippine Islands at the time was a Commonwealth of the United States

EPILOGUE: FOR AN UNCLE WE NEVER KNEW – HIS LIFE-PATH LED TO A DIFFERENT FUTURE

The youngest kabsát of the three Ragsac immigrant boys also wanted to leave the Philippines, but he was convinced to stay in Barangay Pañgada to care for their parents Francisco and Eufemia, while his older brothers earned money to help the family. That young boy dutifully did just that, for his family and ultimately for his and our countries. Lt. Eusebio Reg Ragsac, Philippine Scouts/United States Army, did not survive the Bataan Death March, April 1942.²⁷

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²⁷ As a founding donor of the Pacific Aviation Museum at Pearl Harbor, Ford Island, Hawai'i, I had the option of listing another name instead of mine. On the wall honoring the founding donors is memorialized: "Eusebio Ragsac, Philippine Scouts."