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THE FILIPINO-AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN LOS ANGELES: THE MANONG GENERATION

By Anita Noble, Court Reporting Student

“*Mabuhay!* There are boundless opportunities in America. Jobs are plentiful and you can become rich or you can make the money, return, and live in comfort,” said the gentleman in the white suit, white shoes, and white hat, who looked like a young Colonel Sanders. His listener was one of the few hundred bright students, *pensionados*, who were selected by President Theodore Roosevelt’s territorial government of the Philippines in 1903 to be educated in the United States. Their mission was to return to the Philippines as teachers and provide American leadership.

After his ten-year tour of education, earning a Ph.D., the *pensionado* returned to Luna La Union. After the Philippines became a territory in 1903, the United States inculcated many Filipinos with American ideals. Anglo teachers would impart lessons in English so that the locals would become Americanized. *Pensionados* were supposed to assimilate and to become familiar with the patterns of American culture (Noble).

The means to get to the U.S. for most of the youth (mostly lads) was to join the U.S. Army or Navy, which, they were assured, would also entitle them to citizenship in the United States. Some middle- and upper-class families wanted their children to be educated in the United States, so they paid for their transportation and college. Very few girls came to the United States at that time. The ratio in 1920 to 1924 of male to female was 14 to 1 in the United States. In California, it was 1 to 1.1. (España-Maram 5)

In 1924, there were 721 Filipinos who arrived in Los Angeles; one of them was my father, Vicente Noble, Sr. In 1926, another 1,277 Filipinos settled in Los Angeles; in 1929, an additional 1,176 came. A student’s research in 1933 estimated that there were about 6,000 Filipinos living in Los Angeles. This small population launched Little Manila, which developed on downtown Main Street, bordered by First and Fifth Streets (España-Maram 5).

It is interesting that following eleven years of arrival, Filipinos would be the targets of racial hatred and discrimination due to their lifestyle, lower wages, interracial, and sexual relationships. These factors subjected them to the 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act (the Philippine Independence Act), allowing only 50 persons to immigrate annually, thereby losing their territorial status, and permitting independence after a decade, in 1945.

LIFE IN LOS ANGELES (1921-1933): The Filipinos in these groups comprised three categories: The migrant (a *sacada*), who was commissioned to work the farms as he had in the Philippines (Morales 35), the student, and the serviceman (very few professionals).

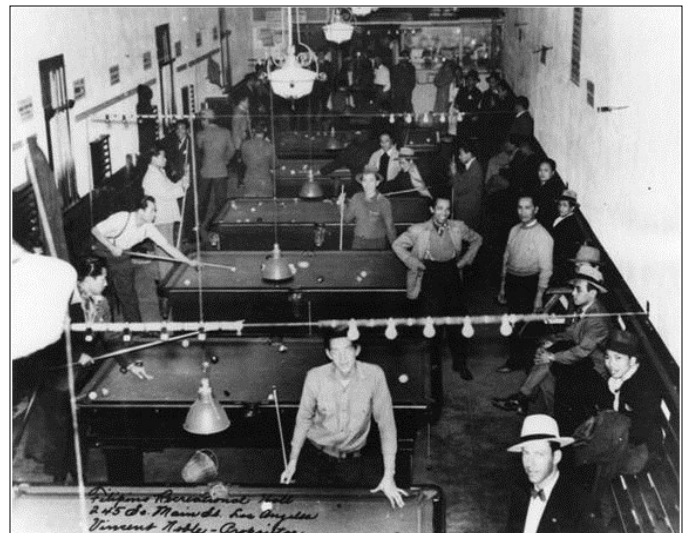


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The migrant laborers' itinerary included traversing the California coast, working seasonally in the southern Central Valley and then traveling up to Northern California to do stoop work in the fields of Delano, Salinas, and the San Joaquin Valley. When they passed through Los Angeles, they would hang out in Little Manila for recreation, playing billiards, visiting the employment agency, the barbershop, and eateries or to mingle with other Filipinos (España-Maram 17). They loved to attend boxing matches at the Grand Olympic Auditorium to cheer Speedy Dado, a Filipino featherweight champion, and gamble wildly at the dens in Chinatown (España-Maram 11).

The students attended various schools, including the University of Southern California and Chapman Christian College. Some also finished their high school education at local institutions, such as Polytechnic High School. The servicemen usually sought employment as cooks, waiters, salad boys, bus boys, porter boys, bellboys, and houseboys; they learned those jobs in the Army or Navy (España-Maram 17). The Noble Employment Agency, also called The Boys' Employment Agency, provided all the houseboys for the movie stars in Hollywood and Beverly Hills. Some allegedly drove trucks for the Mafia delivering prohibited goods as a last resort of employment (Noble).

Since Filipinos were confined to ethnic enclaves, they lived near Little Manila on streets surrounding Main Street or on Bunker Hill. Many resided communally, shared food, and sometimes bought a car collectively. They explored their freedom, albeit restricted, by going to movie theaters and certain dinner houses, where they were allowed: Chinatown gambling lairs, and the taxi-dance halls, where they could meet and possibly escort some of the girls to nightclubs afterward. Students who were serious about their education did not frequent these places, but the Filipino, in his loneliness, escaped into these adventures. Many Filipinos found that the American dream was of limited value since ambitions and opportunities were curtailed. Even a college education did not guarantee them a professional job. Numerous graduates were relegated to menial work.



The Filipino Recreation Hall at 245 South Main Street, in Los Angeles, in the early 1940s. The owner, Vincent Noble, is standing on the right side, fifth from the bottom, holding a billiard rack. (Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library)

WOMEN, WINE & SONG: The urbanized Filipinos strutted Main Street, with its cheap amusements, sporting their Brooks Brothers-like suits (spent from a month's earnings), topped with their Stetson hats to look finished and tailored. Their attire elevated their status and made them feel as members of a society who proved hostile and denigrated them.

The Filipino's love of music of the Occident—not of the Orient, his acclimation to the complex culture of the Spaniards and their Latin-European customs and institutions, mores, and acceptance of the Spanish language as the language of refinement and culture, the Filipino was a romantic per his romantic conception of the role of lover. His genteel qualities with the taxi-dance hall ladies made him a popular, sought-after partner. (Cressey 51)

Notwithstanding the fact that he was exploited by the girls, the Filipino was genuinely respected for his innocent longings and truthful sweet-nothings whispered into the ears of these young lovelies. The men would lavish expenditures of money, dinner dances, beauty contests, behave with extreme courtesy and politeness, leading to proposals

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of marriage to gain favor with these ladies, some a foot taller than they (Cressey 155). Filipinos are exceptional dancers, and they would dig their heels into the dance floor to dazzle onlookers with flamboyance and technique.



Author's mother Juana Noble Manantan, wearing traditional Filipino dress. (Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library)

Many interracial marriages resulted from the taxi-dance hall relationships – some lasted, some didn't. The clash of values ended in annulment, especially by the girl's parents, if she was still a teen. Many girls did not tell their parents they were marrying a Filipino because they were too ashamed. Filipinos who attended the taxi-dance halls were under 25. A number of their marriages were not recognized as "legal" if the magistrate saw fit to view the groom as a Mongol rather than a Malay. The children of these intermarriages were referred to as "American mestizos" (Cressey 148).

Over time, the Filipino's English segued into American slang, and his flowery Spanish words of courtship degenerated into cowboy jargon, which many of the taxi-dance hall girls were accustomed to and which many spoke themselves. His social environment shaped his character, and he became a product of capitalism and a victim of the white man's lust. As in any ghetto, some individuals became vagabonds, living a life of chance: gambling, playing horses, and chasing taxi-dance hall women. Loneliness and the absence of Filipinas drove them down the streets of disillusionment. The Filipino's highest value was family; the vagabond was a lost soul.

RACE PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION: The interracial relationships with white women provoked violence in Los Angeles; angry locals beat up Filipino men; several were shot and killed. Hatred filled the streets in the 1930s. Speedy Dado, the fighter, was shot at a restaurant in Little Manila (probably owned by Vicente Noble, Sr.).

Carlos Bulosan (1913-1956), a labor activist and writer, chronicles the lives of Filipino farmworkers during the Great Depression. He describes a violent scene in his book, *America is in the Heart* (1946), where five white men with guns terrorized two of his co-workers. Jose, one of the men, was tarred and feathered; then one of the men lit a match and burned his pubic hair. The white man said, "Jesus, he's a well-hung son-of-a-bitch. No wonder whores stick to them. The other monkey ain't so hot," and the men proceeded to beat the two Filipino workers to a pulp (Tiongson 44, Bulosan 48). There was no justice because the Filipinos were frequently viewed not only as savages but also as simian-like and treacherous (Tiongson 49).

One of the reasons Filipinos were pulled to the United States was to replace the Chinese cooley labor. Again, working for such pittance angered the white man, especially during the Great Depression; Filipinos' presence was unwelcome; it would trigger hostilities, except for downtown Los Angeles's Little Manila.

Publisher and journalist Valentine S. McClatchy (1857-1938), in his statement supporting the exclusion bill of Filipinos, argued that "their vices are almost entirely based on sexual passion... The irregularity of his conduct, and the special problem in American life which his presence aggravates is, in my opinion, entirely this phase of his character (referring to unrestrained)... The evidence is very clear that having no wholesome society of his own, he is drawn into [the] lowest and least fortunate associations" (qtd. in Tiongson 67).

Filipinos were regarded as oversexed beings because they dated and courted white women. The white men countered, stating that the white girls were of the lowest element and were, in fact, morons (Tiongson 67). McClatchy warned against the natural violence that would result of the Filipinos' rampant sexuality, and he feared the future of the nation if extensive Filipino-white miscegenation was allowed to occur. To protect the nation

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against the intrusion of these “brown men,” the publisher spearheaded a process of exclusion toward Filipinos. He felt the Mexican labor would suffice and that the Filipino farmworkers’ services were no longer necessary; they should be deported.

CHURCHES OFFER REFUGE: Instrumental in the growth of the Filipino community of Los Angeles was the Filipino-American Christian Fellowship. The other church was St. Viviana’s Cathedral on Main Street, one block from Little Manila. Reverend Casiano P. Coloma, the pastor of the Filipino-American Christian Fellowship, together with Grace Lacock, a school teacher of Quaker background, managed the activities of the congregation. To detract from taxi dance hall, gambling, and other unsavory activities, as they termed it, they offered wholesome and healthy stimulation such as the Christian Student Movement, athletic activities such as basketball, volleyball, ping pong; drama; a debate team; a Women’s Club; home economics. The Research Society studied Filipino problems in the United States, including interracial marriage; the social significance of the Repatriation Act; the study of legal rights of the Filipinos in the United States. The Church hosted a convention with selected speakers to expound on labor issues; social integration with communities; living a Christ-like life; promoting friendship and good will. The Debate Club argued the pros and cons of the New Deal, among other predicaments (Corpus 46-48).



Author’s father Vincente Noble, Sr. and his two children Vincente, Jr. (left) and Anita (right). (Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library)

The Philippine Archipelago is composed of 7,107 islands, 2,000 of which are inhabited. There are 120 to 175 dialects. To bring together those who were from the same province or city, who spoke the same tongue, the Church held monthly township gatherings. The township meetings became successful clubs, and these organizations exist to this day, e.g., the Pangasinan Association, Paoay Club, Caballeros de Dimas-alang, Legionarios del Trabajo, Los Angeles Chapter (Corpus 66).

The Filipino-Christian Fellowship drew both Catholics and Protestants to its activities. Some went to mass at St. Viviana’s on Sunday and then joined the activities at the Christian Fellowship.

THE LOS ANGELES FILIPINO COMMUNITY: Leadership grew in the Filipino community, apart from the Filipino Recreation Center and the Filipino-Christian Fellowship. Students who graduated from college came forth to lead the community into new horizons and growth. From 1905 to the post-Depression, the Filipino had experienced subjugation, victimization, and limitation. About 1911, young Filipino farm workers, *sacadas*, were pulled to the United States to supplement the migrant force. They were also a part of the Manong Generation (*manong* is a term of respect for an elder gentleman; *manang* refers to an elder lady). They were the first wave contracted to work in Hawaii, although many also came to the mainland. Many *sacadas* also moved to the canneries in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska (España-Maram 5).

Royal Morales tells the story of “The Old Man of the Sacadas,” describing a migrant worker who came as a *sacada*, and the plight in his senior years, living a frugal existence in the outskirts of Los Angeles. His papers were lost in a farm fire that the white laborers instigated; he had no proof of his immigration. Morales, a social worker who received his master’s degree in sociology, was able to find some form of identification in order for him to receive Social Security and other benefits. This poignant story is repeated in the lives of hundreds of *sacadas* who were unaware of their rights and suffered greatly as the first Filipinos in America. Akin to the Chinese and African

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Americans, they were abused, discriminated against, beaten, burned, and lynched. Lonely, many *sacadas* married Mexican women for comfort and lived a rural life (17).

Newspapers circulated during that time were the *Filipino Christian Church Bulletin*, *Little Manila Times*, *The Filipino News Reporter*, *The Filipino Pioneer*, and *The Philippine Star Press*. The Philippine Little Theatre was established, presenting plays about Filipino-American life as well as traditional American repertoire (Corpus 67).

As the Filipino community expanded, it celebrated historic events. For example, Rizal Day was commemorating the life of Jose Rizal (1861-1896), a Philippine hero—a medical doctor, playwright, poet, and author, who sacrificed his life for Philippine ideology.

In the late 1930s, Filipino Americans rented dance halls where they held Miss Philippine and beauty pageants. It is interesting that some of the white dance-hall girls were candidates for the beauty contests (Cressey 155).

CONCLUSION: The Manong Generation was the forerunner of the Philippine-American immigration. It paved the way for the second, third, fourth, and fifth generations so that they enjoyed the freedom the United States offers. Today, in 2015, Filipinos are the largest Asian group in the United States—and the least visible. Many male members of the Manong Generation married white women and assimilated easily. The Filipinos who did not intermarry remained truer to their Filipino heritage (Bautista 45).



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