

Tens of thousands of Filipinos came here in the 1920s and '30s to make their fortunes on the farms; today they live out their lives far from the land they love

Exiled in California

By Peter W. Stanley

Few international relationships of the 20th century have been as poignant as that between the United States and the Philippines.

Having traded extensively in the archipelago in the 19th century, ruled it from 1809 to 1946, and supported its government economically and strategically since then, the United States has been the most important outside influence on Philippine life. The enormous disparity between the wealth and power of the two peoples, along with the relatively libertarian character of U.S. rule in the islands, dazzled many Filipinos and drew them toward a deferential friendship for Americans.

Filipinos became, in the condescending but well-meant words of William Howard Taft, our “little brown brothers,” and have remained more or less in that relationship ever since. Japanese scholars, preparing for their country’s occupation of the archipelago in World War II, noted a psychological dependence upon America among Filipinos, a phenomenon that modern intellectuals in the islands denounce as “bi-nationalism.”

Even now, though American national and air bases have become flash points for Filipinos’ nationalism, most still regard the United States affectionately as the historical source of schools, roads, public-health programs, artesian wells, democratic political institutions, and the most gregariously informal, backslapping imperialist rulers known to history.

Ironically, however, the Philippines and the Filipinos have never attracted comparable interest or devotion from Americans. Like a small spot on the periphery of our vision, they have been hard to see clearly, and therefore easy to take for granted. This has been so from the very beginning. President William McKinley, who ordered the annexation of the islands following Admiral Dewey’s famous victory in Manila Bay, said that he could not have guessed their actual location within 2000 miles.

Then as now, China and Japan were our principal interests in Asia, and even as an American colony, the Philippines seemed to many little more than a cluster of

“island stepping stones” off the coast of China. Such good works as the American-instituted public-school system, celebrated to this day by Filipinos, were all paid for by Philippine taxes. And when, during the Great Depression, American protectionists and isolationists banded the Philippines an economic and strategic liability, Congress moved quickly to rid itself of the burden.

The Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 established an internally autonomous Philippine Commonwealth, promised independence within a decade, and took steps to reduce the competition of Philippine agricultural exports and Filipino immigrants in the American economy.

Few have suffered more from America’s indifference to the Philippines than the Filipinos who migrated to the United States. As “American nationals” — their status until the 1934 act reclassified them as aliens — Filipinos could migrate freely to this country, but could not become citizens. Fired by the images of wealth, progress, and freedom in their American-designed textbooks and enticed by labor contractors for Hawaiian and Californian agricultural interests, tens of thousands came here in the 1920s and early 1930s, seeking a better life.

By 1930 more than 108,000 lived here. “Birds of passage,” as Americans called them, they were mostly young Ilocanos — residents of the northwestern part of the island of Luzon — hoping to make enough money to support and eventually rejoin families they had left behind. The idea was to return home after a few years, buy land, and finish life as a small free-holding farmer.

American employers, finding transient laborers cheaper and less likely to unionize, encouraged this aspiration. In Hawaii, the standard labor contract for Filipinos actually guaranteed return passage after completion of an agreed amount of work.

Although Filipinos proved to be excellent farm laborers, they quickly fell victim to a variety of forces beyond their control and sank almost to the bottom of American society.

Successors to the Chinese and Japanese farm workers of the past, and forerunners of the Mexican migrant workers of today, the Filipinos harvested mainly poverty and discrimination. Although American wages were high by Philippine standards, so was the cost of living. During the mid-1920s, the going wage in Hawaii was \$2.25 a day; in California, it was less than twenty cents an hour. Obligations to family, perhaps the deepest social value for Filipinos, required that some of this be sent home to the Philippines. Even with primitive housing and some other benefits thrown in, daily expense took most of the rest.

Unable to accumulate the savings they had once dreamed of, the workers faced the humiliating choice of returning home as failures or resigning themselves to a lifetime of poverty in America.

Those who stayed faced social and legal constraints at least as painful as their economic plight. Ineligible for citizenship and therefore unable to protect their interests at the ballot box, Filipinos were forbidden by various state laws to own land, marry white women, or enter certain professions. (These laws lasted, in most cases, until the 1940s.) After their designation as aliens in 1934, they temporarily lost even their rights to public assistance, a major concern during the Depression.

To add insult to injury, a 1940 ruling by the federal government required all Filipino residents of the country to register and be fingerprinted, even though their homeland was still American territory.

Many found, moreover, that laws and official regulations were the least of their problems. Ever since the Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St. Louis in 1904, to which the American government of the Philippines sent an ethnographic exhibit of primitive tribesmen, many Americans had thought of Filipinos as dog-eating savages. This, plus their racial difference from most Americans, intensified and emotionalized opposition to Filipinos' immigration.

Even in the mid-'20s, when their labor was greatly needed in the fields of Hawaii and California, Filipinos were denounced for stealing American jobs and reducing the standard of living of American workers. The American Federation of Labor demanded a ban on Filipino immigration; and, at the local level, threats and actual violence against Filipinos grew in frequency and seriousness.

With the arrival of the Great Depression, the situation became much worse. Filipinos (and their white employers, on occasion) were attached over even the most menial and undesirable jobs. Transient gangs of whites, for example, drove Filipinos out of many California berry fields in the early '30s.

Even more often, violence against Filipinos sprang from incidents over white women. Since almost no one could pay for the transportation of women from home, the sex ration of the Filipino population was grotesquely lopsided: fourteen men for every woman among Filipinos in California during the early 1930s. In a way, this was the cruelest blow of all. For, combined with the anti-miscegenation laws prohibiting intermarriage with whites, the absence of Filipino women doomed

most of the hopeful young men who had come to America to rootless and lonely lives.

Although many Filipinos, particularly those in Hawaii, eventually returned to the archipelago, thousands more remained in the United States. Even under the Draconian quota of 50 entries per year imposed when Filipinos were reclassified as aliens, almost 100,000 could be counted in the 1940 census.

Special exemptions after the war helped raise the figure to 123,000 in 1950. During the first two decades after the war, these aging migrants from the '20s and '30s were, with growing numbers of Mexicans, the backbone of California's agricultural force.

To survive the rigors and disappointments of American life, and to fill at least part of the void left by the absence of families, these grounded and stranded "birds of passage" began as early as the 1920s to organize community institutions. For many reasons, it proved hard work.

The impoverished and peripatetic life of most of the agricultural workers was a major obstacle. Typically, the men would work as waiters, bellhops, domestic servants, and the like in West Coast cities during the winter, and then set out in March to follow the crops or head for Alaska's canneries.

Though some with luck or special skills made a success of this, others remained mired in the poverty that had afflicted them from the beginning. Often these were the people who most needed supportive institutions. One such group collected money for 38 years before amassing enough to build a clubhouse.

Another problem was that men who had come originally from different parts of the Philippines often found it difficult to conceive of each other as sharing a national identity. Dozens of small, precarious fraternal groups formed around common places of origin — the Asinganian Club for men from Asingan in Pangasinan Province, the United Sons of Camiling for former residents of Camiling, Tarlac — or the coincidence of some unusual American address, like the Filipinosotans of Minnesota. Similarly, small local newspapers rose and fell in great profusion.

Apart from fledgling professional groups, like the Filipino Nurses Association, the most effective bridges between Filipinos were agricultural unions.

In response to wage cuts and spiraling violence directed against them, Filipino workers in the Salinas Valley organized the Filipino Labor Union in 1933. Although it failed in its goal of organizing all 30,000 compatriots then working in California's

fields, it did win several pay raises — from 20 to 30 cents per hour — before passing from the scene.

It was followed in 1939 by the Filipino Agricultural Laborers Association, organized around a core of 6000 asparagus workers in the Stockton region. Moderately successful in improving wages and working conditions, FALA also opened a cooperative food store before collapsing in the unusual labor markets of World War II.

In the late 1950s, the immigrants of 30 years before — still poor, but now no longer young — decided to try again. By this time their illusions were meager, and their goals modest. Few of them still dreamed of returning to the islands. Old men, alone together in a land that was not theirs, they called themselves *manongs* (older brothers). At the time, they were making a little over a dollar an hour, plus five cents per box, in the grape fields. They wanted a union to better their wages, and to support and protect them when they would no longer be able to work.

Their answer was to organize the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, in 1959. And this time, at least, they succeeded. Six years later, AWOC made history when a thousand of its members triggered what was to become the Great Grape Strike of 1965. A week later, Cesar Chavez's National Farm Workers Association joined them; and shortly thereafter the two groups merged to form the United Farm Workers.

The *manongs*, however humbly and however later, have finally found a home in America. Literally so, since some of them now live in the retirement village built by the UFW with funds won in the great strike. They are a dying breed. There will be no more like them. Since the liberalization of American immigration laws in 1965, a new wave of Filipino immigrants has flooded into the country, far more numerous than the agricultural workers of the prewar era.

The newcomers are better educated, more affluent. Many of them are highly skilled professional people, proud men and women who have voted with their feet against the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos. They are successors not to the *manongs*, but to the *pensionados* (subsidized students) and the thousands of other Filipino students and professionals drawn to America over the years. Theirs is the world of the future.

The *manongs*, on the other hand, are a link with our past. And with something larger that transcends time and nationality. Through them we may at last see Filipinos as they saw themselves, and witness a small triumph of the human spirit.

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