

COMMENTARY: "Philip Vera Cruz: A Personal History of Filipino Immigrants and the Farmworker Movement." By Craig Scharlin and Lilia Villanueva. University of Washington Press © 2000

By LeRoy Chatfield

First, a few words of disclosure: During my tenure with Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement, I knew and worked with Philip Vera Cruz from 1965 to 1973. Although twice my age, not only was Philip a colleague, but I thought of him as a friend. We participated, and many times sat next to one another, in dozens - perhaps, as many as a hundred - United Farm Worker Organizing Committee board meetings. Because of this personal relationship, I cannot be sure my comments about Philip Vera Cruz will be objective enough or sufficiently dispassionate, but the reader is forewarned.

By documenting the story of Philip Vera Cruz, using his own words, the authors, Craig Scharlin and Lilia Villanueva, have created a book of great historical significance and public service - at least for those even remotely interested in the organized and wide-spread importation/exploitation of immigrant workers by the service and agricultural industries of the United States. It is not an exaggeration to say that for more than a century, these industries have been built and subsidized at the expense of underpaid/exploited immigrant labor - and continues to the present day.

Using recorded oral history to create an interesting and readable book is far more difficult than it seems. Many such book attempts consist of little more than tedious-to-read pages of written transcripts - the story line is relentlessly linear, it lacks human texture and provides little perspective. Scharlin and Villanueva have sorted through the recorded words, smoothed out their rough and uneven edges enabling them to flow easier, and rearranged the chronological timeline to create a narrative line that is more interesting and reader-friendly - but most important: it permits Philip Vera Cruz to tell his story.

Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement aside, Vera Cruz's immigrant story of coming to America from the Philippines in the 1920's to find work, send money home to the family, scratch out some formal education, and make something of himself is representative of

the immigrant story for tens of thousands. Additionally, in Philip's case, we are the beneficiaries of his thoughtful reflections and intelligent analysis about the role of immigrants in American society, the discrimination and humiliation they endured, and the organized self-help efforts they made to improve their status.

One of the most interesting and paradoxical sections of this book relates to the United Farm Worker management decisions about the operation of the Agbayani Village in the late 1970's. The Village, the brainchild of Cesar Chavez, was built with volunteer labor and sited at the union's compound, called Forty Acres, in Delano California. The purpose of the Village was to house elderly Filipinos at affordable rents during their retirement years in a clean, modern, and spacious setting. Instead of living in shacks and farm labor camps, these bachelors – Filipino immigrant laborers to the United State were not permitted to marry, own property or become a U.S. citizen – would be able to live out their lives in their traditional communal setting and have sufficient space for their extensive vegetable gardens and pets.

What a wonderful and universally acclaimed idea! After the Village was built and opened for occupancy, the political realities of the union movement clashed with the real-life needs of aging Filipino farmworkers. Unfortunately, the titular UFW head of the Village, Philip Vera Cruz, was caught in the middle and was unable to exert enough influence to change the outcome – my sense is, only Cesar Chavez could have changed the end result, but it may have been out of his reach as well. While it might be unfair and an overstatement to characterize Agbayani Village as a complete failure, it is certainly true that its ideals and goals were never reached, nor did it ever come close.

In the UFW history of the Delano Grape strike (1965-1970), there were two well-known and well-defined classes of Filipino farmworkers– the Filipino Brothers (strikers) and the crews of Filipino strikebreakers (scabs). Needless to say, the number of Filipino scabs far exceeded the Filipino strikers, and to complicate matters further, not even all the strikers lasted for the duration of the strike, and some of them returned to work in strike areas.

The UFW political problem: Who was going to be permitted to live at Agbayani Village? Strikers, of course, but what about scabs, and what about those who had left the strike? The political problem for the

Filipino communities of farmworkers was different: Agbayani Village should be open at very affordable rents to all aging Filipinos, regardless of their strike history – an anathema to Cesar Chavez! A compromise of sorts was reached: Rents for the faithful strikers would be more affordable, and rates for all others would be less affordable. Even so, it turned out that both classes of rents were set too high compared to the existing Delano rents for a shack or a farm labor bunkhouse. Cheap rent was absolutely essential for retired Filipino farmworkers who had to live off meager social security payments and precious little personal savings.

But rent was not the only issue, there were special cultural needs of immigrant Filipino farmworkers that needed to be met - sexual relations and breeding cockfighting chickens

Because immigrant Filipinos, prior to 1950, were not permitted to marry (and therefore, create families), they lived communally and relied on the regularized “pay day” use of prostitutes to service the sexual needs of their various farmworker communities. This practice of prostitution was forbidden to residents of Agbayani Village, at least at the Village itself, as was the breeding of chickens for cockfighting.

Whether the titular head of the Village, Philip Vera Cruz, a property owner and now married (I have since been informed that technically Philip Vera Cruz was not married, but had formed a long term relationship with a UFW volunteer) was a UFW Vice-President or not, the hurdles of rental rate discrimination, too expensive rents, accepting the use of prostitution, and the business entertainment of cockfighting could not be overcome. For all its promise, Agbayani Village was soon on the wane – a wonderful, but culturally naïve and impractical idea.

In his oral history, Philip Vera Cruz provides thoughtful reflection about the tension created between various groups of Filipino farmworkers as a result of the UFW collective bargaining agreements. Historically, most farmworker strikes, especially strikes initiated by Filipino crews, dealt with the sole issue of “pay” – how much per hour, or how much per piece was the grower offering to pay? If the rate was too low, a spontaneous strike ensued. Sometimes, in response to the wildcat strike, the grower would bump up the rate a nickel or so, or just enough to get the Filipino crews back to work, but if Mexican migrants were readily available to pick up the slack, it might

be “take it or leave it” time. The grower pocketed the pay increase demanded by the strikers and moved forward with replacement crews.

The UFW strike was not about wages, but about union recognition. Cesar Chavez wanted to weaken the stranglehold – the life-or-death control of the job - that growers held over the workers, thereby pitting one racial group against another, or even one worker against another, and all for the purpose of driving down wage rates.

UFW union contracts called for all workers to be dispatched to the available jobs through the union hiring hall - workers with the most seniority and in good standing with the union (dues paid up) - would be dispatched first, those with less seniority afterwards. But as Vera Cruz points out, the growers who used primarily Filipino work crews – especially crews who came back year after year to the same grower – used the traditional Filipino crew system to undermine the collective bargaining agreement and the union.

Example: Conversation sample at the ranch with a grower: Sammy, I have plenty of work for you and your crew, you know that, but the union says I can't hire you. You have to get a dispatch from the union. Bring the OK from the union and your crew can go to work.

Conversation sample at the union hiring hall with the beleaguered UFW staff member: Sammy, we don't have any job requests from that grower. He tells us he is full up. You have to go back and tell him to make a job request.

Repeating this circular who-gets-the-jobs scenario hundreds of times in the course of a harvest or pruning season angered/alienated many of the communal Filipino farm labor crews and undermined whatever confidence they had in the union - if they had any in the first place. There was nothing that Philip Vera Cruz and the other Filipino UFW leadership could do to prevent the growers from using their traditional Filipino crews to help undermine the union.

I was intrigued by Vera Cruz's frank and poignant discussion of the relationship between the Filipino immigrant farmworkers and the family members left behind in the Philippines - especially siblings, nieces and nephews. Of course the primary relationship was the solemn promise that family support money would be sent home on a regular basis, especially to pay for the education of family members.

But over their many years of absence from the family, combined with the harsh discrimination associated with their underclass status in the U.S., most Filipino farmworkers came to feel inferior and were ashamed to admit to family members back home their lowly American status. Philip recounts how one time he counseled a family member not to emigrate to America – one reason being, he did not wish to be seen as a farmworker by his now-educated and newly-minted career professional sibling. Another reason was he did not want to see a family member endure the racial discrimination that was so prevalent in the United States.

Finally, the personal history of Philip Vera Cruz with respect to Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement – the United Farm Workers AFL-CIO – shows how it is possible for two people to have divergent views about the same set of observations. In this case, Philip talks about the role he played at UFW board meetings - I saw it differently.

Despite his unabashed and heartfelt admiration for Cesar Chavez as a person, as a leader, and as a policy-maker, Vera Cruz saw himself as the UFW board member who spoke up to challenge this or that union policy, or to defend a particular principle. He takes pride in the fact that occasionally, in the face of UFW board member opposition, he alone stood up for principle, and even though he was not successful in changing the outcome, at least he tried.

But others – and I am one of them – saw him, and his role, differently. During my tenure with Philip Vera Cruz, he rarely – very rarely - spoke at board meetings. He paid close attention at all times, he took copious notes, he often nodded his assent, and if UFW vice-president, Larry Itliong, was present and holding forth, he often grumbled and muttered to himself. (One time, Philip confided to me that he kept a gun in his car just in case, “Larry tries anything. . .” I interpreted this to mean that he would not permit Larry Itliong to personally attack him in front of other board members, or publicly show him up. During my tenure, I never heard Larry do so.)

Taking the floor, speaking up, and debating the issues did not happen, or if it did, I cannot remember any such occasion. In fact, in the eight years of my leadership position in the UFW, I have no recollection of Philip ever addressing a Friday night union strike meeting or speak publicly at the union leadership retreats held periodically throughout the year. I have no doubt whatsoever that Vera Cruz was critical of,

and did not agree with, some of the UFW board decisions, but he made that known after the meeting in private conversations with others, including selected board members, and sometimes with me.

In truth, Philip Vera Cruz was something of an armchair philosopher/revolutionary, and had he lived two lifetimes, he could not have found a better audience than the farmworker movement. Literally, thousands of university students from throughout the world came to the Delano to learn about Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement, but unless they volunteered to man the picket lines or traveled to the cities to work on the boycott, there was no UFW representative available to teach/inform/pay attention to these students – except Philip Vera Cruz. Philip did not picket nor did he boycott, instead he hung out in Filipino Hall, the meeting and feeding place for the Delano grape strike, or sometimes at Forty Acres, the union's headquarters. For hours at a sitting, he lectured small groups of university students, sometimes even just one at a time, about the plight of California farmworkers, about the strike and boycott, about Cesar Chavez, about the abuses of the growers and agribusiness, about union democracy, about the capitalist system, about California politics, about racial discrimination, about immigration, and so on. He was the resident farmworker movement radical professor, and the more he talked, the more the student visitors loved it.

I have no doubt that some of the things, critical or non-critical, Vera Cruz might have wanted to say and/or debate publicly at a UFW board meeting - but did not or could not - he spoke about passionately with his visiting students, and it is only natural, I think, that having lectured, debated, and answered questions for eager students “semester” after “semester,” for more than a decade, that when he recounted his union career, he saw himself in this discussion/questioning role in all aspects of his UFW leadership position, including his public participation at board meetings. I saw it differently.

None of this – how Vera Cruz saw himself, how I saw him – makes much difference, and while I was not a participant at the time, reading his account of the confrontation that led him to resign his position on the UFW board, it is clear to me that he was pushed off. He had fallen out of favor with Cesar Chavez and the other board members - for reasons real or imagined, it makes little difference – and he was

publicly challenged to pledge allegiance to board confidentiality, or to leave. He resigned; he was 73 years old.

I come away from “Philip Vera Cruz: A Personal History” with three conclusions: (1) By dint of hard work, mutual support, and long suffering, Filipino immigrant farmworkers managed to survive and overcome the exploitation and discrimination they endured under the yoke of California agribusiness; (2) At great personal sacrifice, Filipino farmworkers scraped together enough money over a many-year period to help finance a better life and more educational opportunities for the families they left behind; (3) Because of Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement, Philip Vera Cruz and the Filipino Brothers of the Delano Grape Strike, achieved an esteemed place in California history they could never have imagined.