

Last of the Manongs: Aging Voices of a Farm-Labor Fight Find an Audience

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On the edge of the dusty grape field here where Cesar Chavez led the farm worker movement to national prominence, two frail men in a retirement home have become unlikely embodiments of a distinguished, though mostly forgotten, chapter of labor history that is now being resurrected.

They are among the last of the "manongs," the approximately 100,000 Filipino men who flocked to America in the years before the Depression seeking education and wealth, but finding instead impoverished lives of stoop labor and racial codes that forbade them to own land or marry.

It was the Filipinos who called the historic 1965 grape strike here, prompting Mr. Chavez and his union of predominantly Hispanic workers to follow shortly after. Together the two groups won a landmark union contract for modern farm laborers, and a revered place in the annals of American social struggle.

While Mr. Chavez, who died on April 22 at the age of 66, achieved heroic stature with a generation of liberal intellectuals, the Filipinos were quickly forgotten. But now the few survivors are finding themselves being transformed, at advanced ages, into symbols of racial pride. Asian-American student groups from across California have ventured to a Filipino retirement home here to fortify their own ethnic identities in the elders' tales.

Though the Filipino experience is part of the larger story of American farm workers, it comes with its own especially lonely twist. Forbidden by state anti-miscegenation laws to marry whites, and separated by an ocean from Filipino women, most Filipinos, unlike their Mexican counterparts, did not form families.

They had already become a legion of aging bachelors during the strikes of the 1960's, and the union's early contracts included provisions to help build the retirement home, called Agbayani Village, at the union's former headquarters. But each year's passage leaves fewer living manongs, or respected elders, and the village itself now has only two, Fred Abad, who is 82 years old, and Narciso Oliver, who at 93 is too weak for much conversation.

Part oracle, part oral historian, Mr. Abad is a wisp of a man who might not weigh 100 pounds if he were holding two coconuts. His room is decorated with the memorabilia of student visits -- letters, pennants and snapshots -- and in between bouts of forgetfulness, he entertains visitors with stories of field camp life and early unionism. America Beckoned

He does so without a trace of bitterness. "Some of the other boys were mistreated," he said. "I was not mistreated. In fact, the growers were good to me."

The great influx of Filipino farm workers occurred in the 1920's, after anti-Asian immigration laws had barred the continued importation of Japanese laborers then working the California

fields. In need of workers, growers sent recruiters to the Philippines, which as an American territory was exempted from the law.

As a teen-ager in the province of Ilocos Sur, Mr. Abad was much impressed with the accounts of America filtering back from relatives and neighbors. In addition to impressive photos, "they also sent money and clothes that looked much better than what the Philippines had," Mr. Abad wrote several years ago in a diary.

Mr. Abad's father was less impressed, reminding his son that he had promised his dying mother that he would seek an education. Mr. Abad pledged to do so in America -- a promise never kept - - and with his father's grudging permission boarded a steamship in 1929. He was 17 years old.

After an unhappy stint washing dishes in Oakland -- a job "only for servants," he said -- he lit out to the labor camps south of San Jose. "Life in the camp was happy," he wrote in the diary.

But not all Filipinos found it so. A measure of the racial antagonism they faced can be found in the remarks of a grower's publicist, who told a newspaper at the time that the Filipino race was "the most worthless, unscrupulous, shiftless, diseased semi-barbarian that has ever come to our shore." On several occasions bombs were tossed into Filipino labor camps.

The arrival of the Depression shattered most Filipino hopes for fortune; with farmers no longer needing the labor, the Government even offered to pay the workers' way home. But with even less opportunity in the islands, most, like Mr. Abad, chose to stay.

One legacy of the ensuing decade was loneliness: men outnumbered Filipino women by about 14 to 1. Seeking companionship, many laborers crowded into dance halls, to buy 10-cent tickets for a moment with a rented partner.

"The men would blow a whole day's wage in 10, 20 minutes," wrote Ronald Takaki, a historian at the University of California at Berkeley. He said the Filipinos had found the discrimination especially painful "because they saw themselves as Americans." Legally, Just Friends

Mr. Abad was among the lucky who did find a companion, a white woman. But for 11 years, until 1947, California's racial laws kept them from marrying. "Sometimes the police would stop my car and say, 'Are you married?' " Mr. Abad said. "And I'd say: 'No, we're friends. Officer, is it a crime to have friends?' "

A second legacy of the decade was the labor radicalism, in which many of the young Filipino workers played prominent roles. Growers grew adept at breaking Filipino strikes with Mexican workers, and vice versa, a pattern that persisted into the 1960's. As Mr. Chavez began organizing Mexican workers, then far more numerous, he inherited ethnic distrust.

On Sept. 8, 1965, the predominantly Filipino members of the Agricultural Workers' Organizing Committee called a strike in Delano, seeking to raise their wages by 20 or 30 cents, to \$1.40 an

hour. Mr. Chavez, who had been organizing a separate, mostly Latino group, the National Farm Workers Association, later said, "All I could think was, 'Oh God, we're not ready for a strike.' "

But worrying that inaction would discredit his own efforts, he persuaded his members to join in 12 days later. Commanding the larger organization, he quickly took charge of the strike, and a year later the groups merged into the United Farm Workers, with Mr. Chavez as its head.

Some manongs were already facing retirement in the early days of the union. Some returned home, some scattered across California and several dozen moved into Agbayani Village, which became a point of pilgrimage for those interested in the story. "There's a kind of mythology about the manongs," said Professor Takaki, whose students are among those who have made the trek. From the Young, Thanks

Mr. Abad's walls have become a kind of scrapbook of student visits. "Thank you for bringing our culture here," wrote Brian DeLeon across a college pennant signed by a dozen other visitors from the University of California at Irvine. Juan Martinez, a junior high school student, wrote, "I am honored to have met the people (manongs) that set a ground for the Filipinos in the United States."

Mark Pulido, the student body president at the University of California at Los Angeles, said he had been periodically visiting the village for four years.

"We come here and bother these guys, listen to their stories," said Mr. Pulido, who also worked on an oral history of a Filipino union vice president, Philip Vera Cruz, published by U.C.L.A. last year. "When I was a freshman, there were 10 or 12 manongs here. Now it's just Manong Fred and Manong Narciso."

Mr. Abad made his first trip back to the Philippines several years ago but, after more than a half-century away, found it not much to his liking. Now, a widower for the last decade, he is reconsidering.

Though he was too frail on April 29 to travel a few hundred yards to Mr. Chavez's funeral, dozens of students and volunteers were coming to see him, and he told them of his travel plans.

"I'm old," he said. "I like to spend a little time over there before I die. Plus, he said, he faces a piece of unfinished business: "Maybe I can get married to a Filipina."