



Filipino officers of the U.S. Armed Forces in the Far East in a mess hall months before most of them were killed or captured by invading Japanese forces at the start of World War II.

All photos courtesy of Maria Christina Sison Panis Poisot unless otherwise noted.

The Pinoys of Bayou City: Growth of a Community

By Jose Ordonez

The history of Filipinos in the southern United States stretches back to the mid-eighteenth century, when burgeoning trade routes between the two lands encouraged small numbers of Filipino migrants to settle in some of their first enclaves in the Americas. In 1763 Filipino fishermen established the small communities of St. Malo and Manila Village in present-day Louisiana near the Mississippi River delta. In the deep recesses of the Louisiana swamp, residents recreated small parcels of the Philippines on American soil.

Visitors to these villages might have been quite surprised to find authentic Southeast Asian stilt fishing houses. Although these isolated yet unified outposts survived for more than a hundred years, only the ruins of the settlements' buildings remain today after devastating hurricanes. Nevertheless, these tiny fishing villages live on in memory as progenitors of the modern Filipino American community. While substantial numbers of Filipinos did not immigrate to the region again until the 1960s, these pioneers set the template for the success of Filipino life in the United States.¹

As an ever-expanding international trade hub and desti-

nation point for thousands of immigrants, Houston has welcomed increasing numbers of Filipinos in recent decades, coinciding with the wider increase in Asian immigration to the city. For much of the twentieth century, immigration from Asia was severely limited until major policy reforms in 1965 changed that. Filipinos have become one of the fastest growing Asian communities in the Houston area, numbering over 20,000—the largest regional concentration in Texas. Significant immigration from the Philippines began in the 1980s, with few migrants arriving before the 1960s.²

Decades of political instability and the search for better opportunities have prompted waves of emigration from the Philippines. Filipinos, also known as Pinoys, have settled in countries around the world, with sizable communities forming in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. These overseas Filipinos, while initially escaping an uncertain future in their homeland, have now been joined by more recent settlers looking for greater opportunities in business and education.³

Filipino and U.S. Histories Cross Paths

To understand Houston's deep connections to the Philippines, an appreciation of the country's history is vital. A large tropical archipelago in the Western Pacific, the Philippines straddles major oceanic transit routes, making the island chain a focal point for international trade for centuries. The first European contact with the Philippines occurred during the Spanish expedition by Ferdinand Magellan to circumnavigate the world. His death at the hands of Filipino warlord Lapu Lapu presaged the eventual colonization of the Philippines by the Spanish. Spain ruled over the islands for almost four hundred years, and its influence on Filipino identity and development continues today.

Although the United States had active trade relationships with Asian countries in the 1800s, its most direct ties with the Philippines occurred when the colony came under American control in 1898 following the U.S. victory in the Spanish-American War. American control was immediately contested by the Filipinos in the Philippine-American War, in which the U.S. military eventually quelled Filipino resistance after several years of fighting that cost more than 100,000 Filipino and 4,000 American lives.

The United States established an unincorporated territory and then a commonwealth over the Philippines. After liberating the country from a bloody Japanese occupation during World War II, the United States finally awarded the Philippines sovereignty in 1946. For the next half century, the Philippines struggled through turbulent periods of dictatorship, low-level conflicts, and insurgencies throughout the country.

The most notable dictator during this period was Ferdinand Marcos, whose lavish lifestyle came at the expense of millions of impoverished Filipinos. This contributed to immense political instability and eventually led to the toppling of his regime. His ouster in 1986 ultimately brought a return of democratic institutions in the country. The transition was not without setbacks, though, and the Philippines continue to be plagued by regional conflicts, poverty, and natural disasters.⁴

Although these historical developments encouraged many Filipinos to leave their homeland, it would be reductive to say that all Filipinos left because of internal strife. Many left simply for greater opportunities abroad or to experience a lifestyle unavailable to them in the Philippines. For many of these Filipinos, Houston and Southeast Texas offered the opportunity for that new life.

Filipino American Soldiers Seeking Justice

Filipino Americans have a long tradition of service in the armed forces, playing a crucial role in some of history's most momentous conflicts, such as the fight against Japan during the Second World War. The Philippines, at the time still a protectorate of the United States, was invaded in 1941 during Japan's lightning conquests of Southeast Asia. The entire island nation suffered under an oppressive occupation by Japanese forces until a concerted campaign by American and Filipino forces to oust the Japanese began in 1944.

By the time Japan surrendered in late 1945, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos had died in the war. Thousands of American soldiers also laid down their lives in the

liberation of the Philippines, but it is widely accepted that the efforts of regular and irregular Filipino soldiers fighting alongside them helped hasten the Japanese defeat. Without their efforts, the campaign might have been costlier for American forces.

The legacy of World War II veterans has left an indelible mark in the Filipino community, but the recognition of their contribution to the victory has not always been forthcoming from the U.S. government. Although the value of Filipino troops in the war was not questioned, Congress nevertheless passed the Rescission Act of 1946 that retroactively annulled benefits promised to Filipino World War II veterans as American nationals and that were available to other U.S. soldiers.⁵

Members of the Houston Filipino community have taken a leading role in recognizing the historical achievements of these Filipino Americans. While the Filipino American populations on the East and West Coasts loom large, Houston Filipinos are pulling their weight in the national conversation about their history. One native Houstonian, Maria Christina Sison Panis Poisot, has been at the forefront of the movement to honor Filipino World War II veterans.



A pre-war portrait of Captain Francisco Panis. Like most soldiers in his unit, Panis endured miseries in the Bataan Death March and prison camps after their surrender to the Japanese.



Christy Panis Poisot and Major General Antonio Taguba (Ret) flank Christy's father as he holds the medals belatedly awarded in August 2012 to Christy's grandfather, Major Francisco Panis, for his service in World War II.

For Poisot, the campaign to acknowledge the Filipino veterans' contributions is personal. Growing up, she always heard tales of her grandfather's experience during the war, but unfortunately it was not until he had passed away that she came across his service papers and truly grasped what he had gone through. Her grandfather, Francisco Panis, was an officer in the USAFFE (United States Armed Forces of the Far East) when the Japanese invaded the Philippines immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Despite a valiant resistance, the American and Filipino soldiers were cut off and forced to surrender.

What happened after the surrender endures as one of the most brutal events in all of World War II: the Bataan Death March. Panis, along with over sixty thousand Filipino and American prisoners of war, were forced to march for sixty miles to a prison camp with little food or water, all the while being subjected to extreme abuse and even summary executions. Francisco Panis was lucky to survive the war, but the grueling march and barbaric conditions of the Japanese prison camp weighed heavily on him, as well as on the minds of many of the thousands of other Filipino veterans of World War II.

Christy Poisot's rediscovery of her grandfather's legacy was a wakeup call. "A story unfolded of a man I wish I had gotten to know better when he was alive," she explains.⁶ Francisco Panis was never awarded the military medals that he earned, since granting the Philippines independence immediately after the war left the status of veterans' awards and benefits in limbo. After years of collecting enlistment evidence and corroborations, Christy finally convinced the U.S. military to posthumously award her grandfather's numerous medals, and in 2012 the Chao Center for Asian Studies at Rice University hosted an event at which Major General Antonio Taguba (Ret) presented them to the family. Now, Christy is dedicating her energy to help rally the national Filipino community to recognize the sacrifices of all Filipino World War II veterans with a campaign through the Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project to have the Filipino soldiers collectively awarded the Congressional Gold Medal.⁷

Filipinos Caring for Houstonians

Filipino Americans in Houston have made their mark in the medical field. This corresponds with a national trend of Filipino representation in the health care industry. Since the late 1960s, the majority of foreign-born nurses practicing in the United States have come from the Philippines. Large segments of the Filipino population living overseas receive education and training in the medical profession. The famed Texas Medical Center has naturally attracted thousands of these Filipino health workers to Houston, where they have become an integral part of the wider medical community.

The recruitment of Filipino nurses and other medical staff is a direct result of the United States' shared history with the Philippines. The U.S. government established educational programs that planted the seeds of the burgeoning Filipino nursing community, with professional American curriculums and English language training that gave Filipino health workers a leg up over other foreigners seeking employment in the United States. After the Philippines



A group of mid-twentieth-century Filipina nurses training in the Philippines. Thousands of Filipinos with training in the medical field have immigrated to countries around the world.

became independent, American hospitals actively recruited Filipino nurses, especially in light of a growing post-World War II health worker shortage that intensified with the growth of Medicare and Medicaid.⁸

Melody de Guzman Barsales is an example of one of these nurses who played an important role in the local medical community. She came to Houston in 1962 as part of a visitor exchange program at age eighteen after graduating from the University of the Philippines College of Nursing. She worked at Methodist Hospital on a heart transplant team. Because her skills were needed, immigration reforms passed in 1965 allowed her to stay permanently. Barsales later mar-



Lois Moore interviews a prospective nurse in 1988, a time when large numbers of Filipino nurses were recruited to fill critical shortages in Houston.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-N1988-0462-010.



Pugon De Manila is one of the city's popular Filipino restaurants. It serves three meals daily in addition to selling cakes, pasties, and frozen foods. Photo courtesy of author.

ried, became a registered nurse, and then an operating room supervisor.⁹

Today Houstonians regularly come into contact with Filipino nurses, doctors, and other healthcare workers. The Texas Medical Center has been at the forefront in employing Houston's immigrants, and Filipinos have enmeshed themselves into the wider international milieu. Filipinos in the health care industry also make their voices heard through organizations. These groups, such as the Philippine Nurses Association of Metropolitan Houston founded in 1980 as part of the national entity, serve as forums for unity and recognition within the wider medical and Filipino communities.¹⁰

The experiences of Filipinos in the medical profession represent a broader trend as Filipino Americans have historically assimilated into American life and largely been accepted into the middle class. Once again, Houston is no exception to this trend as Filipinos in the city tend to have attained higher educational levels and incomes than the average Houstonian. Compared with other Asian immigrant groups, Filipino Americans have notably assimilated to a high degree, with the unfortunate effect of dampening their visibility within the wider community.¹¹

Pinoy Flavors in Houston's Food and Faith

Filipino Houstonians have also flourished in the food industry. Most Filipino restaurants are centered in southwest Houston, clustered amongst hundreds of various Asian restaurants in Chinatown. To better cater to their Filipino customers who work and live in the Medical Center area, several Filipino restaurants and bake shops have opened in

south-central Houston. One of the most notable is the popular international, Manila-based fast food chain Jollibee Filipino located near NRG Park. The opening of this Filipino fast food staple in Houston is a sure sign of the growth of the Filipino community. The nearby Pugon De Manila also has a menu composed of traditional Filipino food, serving a more epicurean dining experience.¹² These and other Filipino restaurants serve as communal centers for Filipino Americans and as ambassadors of Filipino culture to the wider community, as seen with other local ethnic eateries.

The delicious Filipino foods that Houstonians enjoy highlight a defining feature of the community's culture: its syncretism. Centuries of colonial rule by Spain and the United States added new textures to an already diverse culture. One of the most enduring legacies of the Spanish

era is in religion, with Catholicism as the Philippines' predominant faith. Filipinos have brought their faith with them wherever they have settled, and Houston's already thriving Catholic community has benefitted from the influx. Filipinos play a prominent role in church activities, with many Filipino clergymen added to the ranks of Catholic Church leaders and Filipinos filling greater percentages of the pews.¹³

A significant minority of Filipinos are Protestant Christians or Muslims. A result of Protestant missionaries that arrived in the Philippines during the American occupation, the Protestant Filipino community is represented in Houston most notably in sizable Baptist and Methodist congregations. As with their Catholic compatriots, religion is a central feature of life for these Filipinos, but their shared experience as an immigrant population ensures the vitality of their community within the various Protestant denominations.¹⁴

The history of most Filipino Americans in Houston is a relatively new one compared to that of other immigrant groups. Nevertheless, the community quickly became an integral aspect of the wider Asian American tapestry that gives Houston its world-renowned vibrancy. In the future the Filipino community in Houston will no doubt continue to help strengthen the ties that have developed between the United States and the Philippines for more than a century.

Jose Ordonez earned his undergraduate degree in history from The University of Texas. He recently completed an internship with *Houston History*, where he shared his passion for studying the past with like-minded historians.