Filipinos made immense contributions in Vallejo

By Nancy Dingler

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Vallejo writer Mel Orpilla chronicles a tragic era in Filipino-American history in his book ‘Filipinos in Vallejo’ Mel was born and raised in Vallejo, and early on had an insatiable curiosity about his familys and the Filipino Communitys beginnings.

Mel explains it best in his introduction to his book, ‘Filipinos in Vallejo’ (the book can be found at the Vacaville and Vallejo museum book stores).

‘Twenty years ago, in an Ethnic Studies class taught by Wayne Maeda at California State University, Sacramento, I discovered the Filipinos did indeed have a history in America.’

It was a revelation to Mel that his father, who came to America in 1926, experienced the most tragic era in Filipino-American history, when his father and may others faced discrimination and oppression upon arriving in this county.

Up until Professor Maedas class, Mel had taken his fathers experience and those of the ‘Manongs’ (Filipino old timers) for granted. Most importantly, as Mel learned about Filipino-American history, his connections to his family and community strengthened.

Mel began a collection of photos, with those his father had taken upon his arrival in Vallejo. One of the earliest photos is of Daniel Jose Tiburcio who arrived in California in 1927.

Daniel found work at Mare Island where pay was good and employment steady with paid vacations, sick leave and health benefits. When World War II began, Daniel joined the U.S. Army, serving in the famed First Filipino Battalion.

Mel, an avid photographer, went on to add to his fathers photo collection with many photos of his own. Friends and relatives, for years, encouraged Mel to write a book, so the photo collection could be shared by others.

As early as 1587, Filipinos aboard Spanish galleons arrived in California. The Spanish Galleon Nuestra Senora de Buena Esperanza, captained by Pedro de Unamuno, anchored off the coast of present day Morro Bay.

The captain wrote in his journal that he sent several Filipinos to scout the shore. There
was a skirmish with local natives, resulting in the death of one of the scouts.

The first wave, albeit small, of Filipino immigration to the U.S. began in 1812. Filipinos from Manila Village (near New Orleans) were among the ‘Batarian’ who fought against the British with Jean Lafitte in the Battle of New Orleans.

The second immigration wave was more substantial, occurring between 1906 to 1934, with the heaviest concentration coming to California and Hawaii.

For more than 300 years, Spain had colonized the Philippines, using Manila Bay as their great seaport, trading silver and rich spices with other countries surrounding Southeast Asia and the rest of the world.

In exchange for gold, the Spanish gave the Filipinos Christianity. The Philippines were named after King Philip II of Spain.

The Spanish connection came to an end after the Spanish-American war in 1898. Through the Treaty of Paris, Spain sold the Philippines to the U.S. for $20 million dollars without letting the Filipinos know.

The early 20th Century’s second wave of immigrants mainly came to work the land to farm. What was unique about those who came to Vallejo, is that most went to work on Mare Island.

While the majority of Filipinos were dishwashers, waiters and bus boys, Vallejo offered good jobs and good pay. Mare Island was a magnet to civilian and military personnel.

Even though a job at Mare Island guaranteed financial stability, Filipinos took pride in the fact that their efforts were helping in the defense of our country.

The majority of Filipino immigrants had no plans to stay in the U.S., but because most jobs available did not provide enough money, purchasing a ticket back home became remote.

During the 1920s and 30s, the ratio of men to women was 20 to one. In some places, it was 40 to one. The Filipinos were not allowed to marry ‘white women.’ In California, the local authorities imposed anti-miscegenation laws.

During the Great Depression, the Tydings-Mcduffie Act of 1934 was passed to limit Filipino immigrants to just 50 persons a year. Its main purpose was to exclude Filipinos because they were perceived as a social problem, disease carriers and an economic threat.
American attitudes toward Filipinos changed with the onset of World War II. Filipinos joined the U.S. Navy to fight against the Japanese.

Filipinos were allowed to join the navy because they were so-called ‘Nationals.’ They were not U.S. citizens, nor were they illegal aliens. The wartime influx, became the third immigration wave.

Many of the bachelors lived in boarding houses and this was true of the bachelors in Vallejo. Many of the old turn-of-the-century Victorian homes in Vallejo were owned by Filipino families and converted into boarding houses.

The bachelors also joined the Legionarios del Tabajo in America lodges from Seattle to San Diego. The fraternity was established in 1924 to provide a support network with opportunities to foster leadership and community development skills.

Boxing was a favorite pastime for many Filipino bachelors. Filipino boxers, especially in the lightweight ranks, dominated the boxing world. Sonny Hatsme was in the 1939 Midwest Flyweight Champion and a contender for the Worlds Flyweight Boxing title.

Many Filipinos who served the United States during World War II went back to the Philippines to marry. Mels father, Nazario, through a friend, met his future bride in the Philippines. They corresponded for over a year before marrying in 1959.

Family is a huge part of the Filipino experience. Traveling from or to the Philippines to celebrate family occasions, such as a baptism, is the norm. Overwhelmingly, these families love to have parties. Weddings, religious holidays and birthdays are always occasions to celebrate.

Blue Rock Springs Park in East Vallejo was a popular place for community picnics. Originally, home to an exclusive hot springs resort, around 1960, it was turned into a public park for all to enjoy.

Parades were a great occasion for celebration as well. Everyone, including the children, would dress in their ‘Sunday best’ to walk in Vallejos Fourth of July parade.

Feeling the deep need to have a community center for the Filipinos in Vallejo, leaders of the community set out to establish a building. Originally a community center was planned for the corner of Grant and Cherry Streets, but the building that became available was a laundry on Sonoma Boulevard.

The building was purchased in the 1950s and converted into the Filipino community center. The building underwent another massive remodeling in the late 1990s. Many
organizations and families rent the building to hold meetings and parties.

Mels dad, Nazario, never envisioned upon his arrival in Vallejo and going to work on Mare Island, that he would witness the closing of the Naval Shipyard. Mare Island was at the heart of the Filipino presence in Vallejo.

Nazaro worked there for 37 years, retiring in 1974.