

# Filipinos of Watsonville: A dream come true

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WATSONVILLE — In 1919, the very first Filipino people set foot on the fertile land known as the Pajaro Valley. It must have seemed a paradise full of

possibilities. They longed to experience America's promise of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Filipinos finally have realized this dream but not without a struggle. A dream of the good life tempted immigrants to pursue a better

life in the United States. However, it was hard won. In fact, for many of the working men it became a disappointing nightmare. They were to endure a legacy of sometimes-hostile discrimination before being accepted into United States and Watsonville.

They arrived from their home country, from Northern Luzon and parts of the Visayan Islands. In the late 1800s they immigrated to New Orleans to work as laborers. There they were ex-

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perts on the docks, fishing and preserving seafood. Filipinos immigrated into the United States after the Philippines was acquired as a colony in 1902. The opportunity to find work and build better lives was a powerful attraction to immigrants from many countries. Filipinos had the same desires.

After Spain had ruled for nearly four centuries the United States dominated the Philippines. Immigrant Filipinos were called American Nationals and denied citizenship in America. In 1924, 12 Filipinos headed by a man named Gabriel Javier came from Hawaii and settled in the Pajaro Valley. The men paired off to work for farmers in a 50-acre ranch across the Pajaro River.

Farm style living conditions for the men were terrible. Their lodgings were a collection of clapboards. They nailed cartons to the ramshackle structures to prevent cold drafts. Their beds were hardly any better. After a long day in the lettuce fields or at the packing plants, they retired on beds made from discarded old lumber boards and boxes. For cooking they used woodstones and cold baths could be taken in large wooden tubs. They

were paid 10 cents an hour from sunrise to sunset and then charged to use toilet facilities — a far cry from the Filipinos in Watsonville today.

After the war in 1946, Filipinos enjoyed the rights of citizenship more fairly. Although the politics of war had interfered with their introduction to America, most still revered the land as an ideal place to live.

From 1946 on, Filipinos have increased prominence and progressed in education and careers in the area. Once their rights were granted, discrimination would not be tolerated. As citizens Filipino Americans own property, intermarry. At last they became a part of the dream guaranteed by the United States Constitution. The proud citizens opened businesses in the community.

Popular Filipino trades were dry cleaning, barbershops, restaurants, and grocery stores. The second generation of Filipinos are doctors, lawyers, and teachers.

Each member of the Tabasa family is an important Watsonville citizen and a wonderful example for new generations of Filipinos. Francine is the adult daughter of Rosita Tabasa. Francine Tabasa works as a teacher and enjoys being a part of the area. "I've worked in Watsonville for many

years. Watsonville is a diverse community," she says. Her parents have moved back to the Philippines having raised Francine and her two brothers in Watsonville.

Nena Alminiana of Watsonville understands that time can heal old wounds, saying "Today the younger generation may be shocked to hear of these things." The Filipino attendees of an annual Old-timers Luncheon agreed collectively that they could forgive the discrimination of the past. They recognize that even though painful memories exist they are proud of having overcome the obstacle of racism. "We want to emphasize this is past history, and history cannot be changed," says Alminiana.

John Damasco is active in the cultural community. He acknowledges the Filipino contribution, and says they have exhibited artistry, and ingenuity in the creations of floats during the July 4th parades winning 1st and 2nd prizes.

The newest organization to be formed is the Filipino Catholic Association. It was created in 1960 as part of the Filipino Catholic Federation of America. In Watsonville, the Filipino community is as strong as it has ever been. This is of benefit to everyone living here. Filipinos have assimilated and been welcomed into the Watsonville as neighbors and friends.