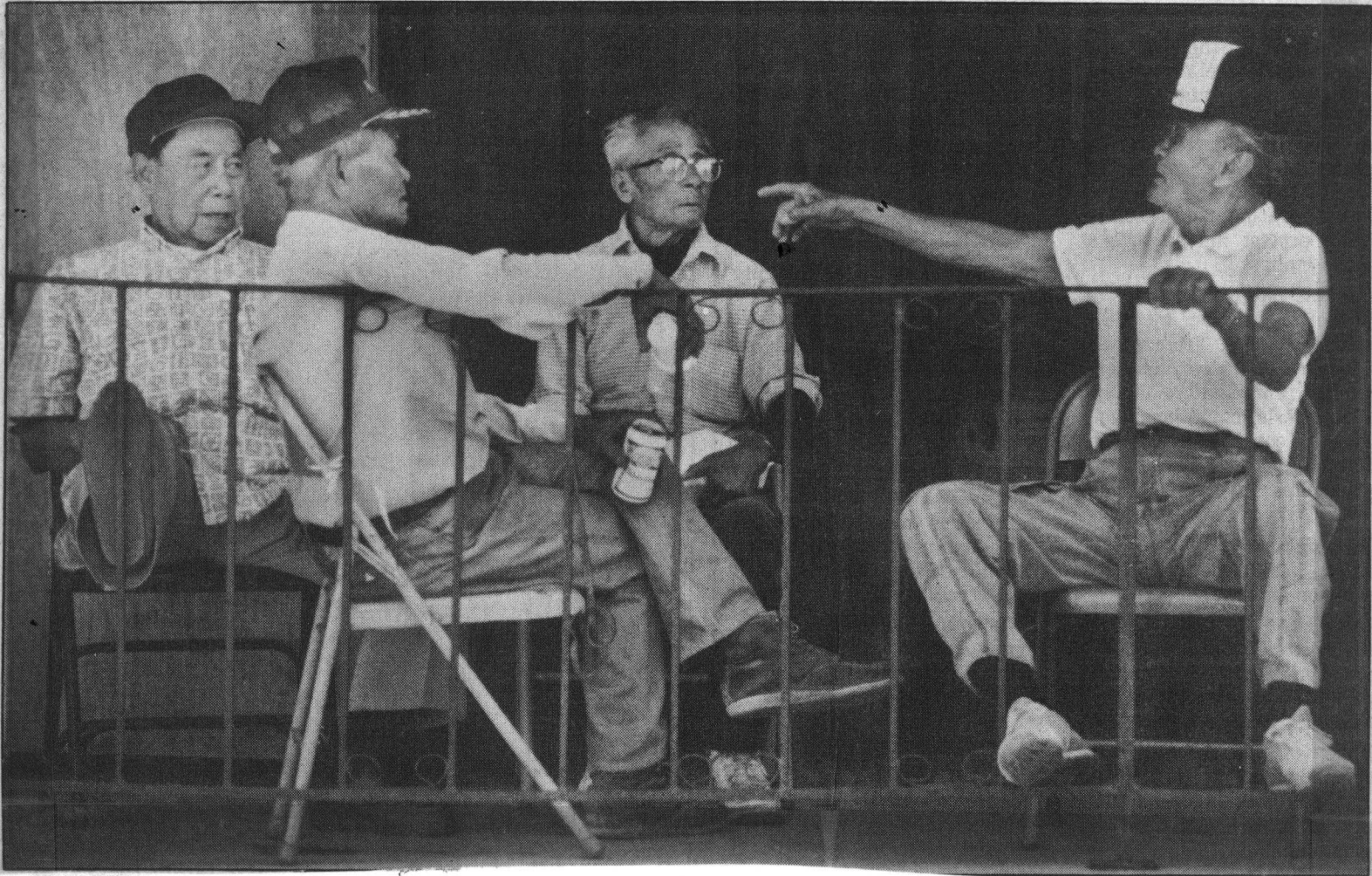


Filipino celebration



Annual barbecue a chance to reflect

By SUSANNA HECKMAN
STAFF WRITER

The Filipino Community served up 700 lunches yesterday at its annual barbecue, celebrating its history, its newly renovated Freedom Boulevard meeting center and the group's own energized spirit.

People, from toddlers to those whose lives span nearly all of the 20th century, came and went at the center throughout the afternoon, taking their time with the generous portions of chicken and gathering to talk in small groups at the long tables.

"We're smaller now, but we're more united," said Delyn Noir Lota, 18, summing up recent shifts in the group's membership, which now stands at about 130.

"We call everyone 'aunt' or 'uncle,' even if they're not related at all," Lota said.

Lota's parents and their siblings were among the more recent influx of immigrants from the Philippines, arriving over the last two decades. Many are experienced professionals — doctors, lawyers, teachers.

"We're three cultures now," Lani Antonio, 49, said. "There are the old-time Filipino immigrants, who paved the way in the 1920s, and the recent arrivals, who are very articulate and sophisticated and bring a new flair, and then there are the offspring (of the first immigrants), like me."

Antonio, a second-generation Filipino, grew up in a labor camp on Trafton Road, went through Pajaro Valley schools, and now manages the respiratory care unit at Watsonville Community Hospital.

It's not easy to get leaders of the Filipino Community to talk about the history of discrimination that Filipino immigrants have faced over the years. They say they want to look forward, concentrate on the present, and draw more young people, especially the children and grandchildren of the community, into active membership.

Antonio said that except for a teacher who once told him he had "evil brown eyes," he's never been conscious of any racial hostility directed toward himself.

"I've asked my uncles about the discrimination, and they've told me," he said, "but I think they feel it's time for them to forget all that stuff and go on with their lives."

The Republic of the Philippines, a tropical archipelago with as many as 7,000 islands, was a Spanish colony for nearly 400 years when the United States took control of it on July

4, 1902. The Philippines did not gain independence until after World War II.

Meanwhile, when the United States was faced with a shortage of cheap labor in the 1920s, the government allowed some Filipino men to come here to work in the fields. A group of 12 Filipino men from Hawaii arrived in the Pajaro Valley in 1924, and began working on a ranch in North Monterey County.

More men arrived from the Philippines over the years. By the 1930s, the men who arrived to seek their fortunes had been educated in American schools in the Philippines, and many were as young as 16.

One of those, Amando Alminiana, now 82, came to Watsonville in 1929 hoping to further his education.

What he found was a sleepy Watsonville and a political climate in which he was not allowed to buy property or hold a job other than as a field hand, houseboy, dishwasher or cook.

Social events, such as dances, were segregated.

Filipinos were forbidden by law to "go with the white ladies," he said, and certainly forbidden to marry them. The ratio of Filipino men to women was 143-to-1, but the laws on intermarriage weren't struck down until 1948.

In order to earn a little money for school, Alminiana went to work in the fields. Then it was time to fulfill a promise he'd made to his brother to send him to school, and he himself ended up becoming a barber, running a barber shop on Main Street for many years.

When the United States entered World War II, about 90 percent of the Filipino immigrants here were inducted into the armed services and sent overseas. Alminiana was among them.

After the war, with the Philippines finally independent from the United States, Filipino immigrants were allowed to become U.S. citizens.

"In World War II they found out we were very loyal to America," Alminiana said.

He met his wife, Nena, in the Philippines during the war. She was appointed head nurse of a military clinic hastily set up at a convent outside Manila after some heavy U.S.-Japanese fighting on the islands. Her first husband, a doctor, had been killed when the Japanese strafed the clinic he was working in.

Amando Alminiana was in charge of the medical battalion



Mike McCollum

Erlinda Makiramdam and Fred Castillo.

that set up the convent clinic.

At the time of their meeting, she had a young son and she didn't want to leave the Philippines. Amando Alminiana returned to his barbershop in Watsonville.

When he came back to woo her in 1947, however, she married him and moved here.

Like many educated Filipinos, she was fluent in Spanish as well as English. She went to work for the Visiting Nurse Association and over the 18 years she worked there, her Spanish made her very valuable to the association. For a time, she was the only nurse who was able to serve the growing community of immigrants from Mexico.

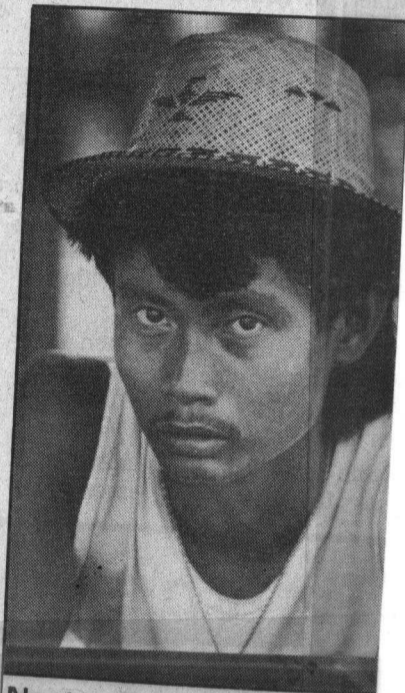
Besides working and raising their three children, both the Alminianas jumped right into the social life of the Pajaro Valley.

Nena Alminiana has been a driving force behind the Filipino Women's Club and the Filipino Community, as well as the YWCA. Amando Alminiana joined the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Knights of Columbus, and kept his business going until he was 74, in spite of being forced to move to Mission Street in Santa Cruz in the late 1960s when Main Street was widened.

The Alminianas said the Filipino Community, which was first organized in 1931 as a response to violent race riots in Watsonville in 1930, was finally able to buy a building for its community center six years ago because of the energy and economic success of the younger generations and because of the successful transition of the new, professional immigrants.

One of these, Pacifico Lota Jr., Delyn Noir Lota's uncle, is the Filipino Community board chairman. He immigrated to the United States in 1982.

He is a former major in the Filipino Air Force and a commercial airplane pilot who now



Nestor Bragedo listens to the older men talk.

works for the U.S. Postal Service.

Before leaving the Filipino military, Lota flew planes and helicopters for many of the country's most powerful people, including Imelda and Ferdinand Marcos.

Many of the more recent immigrants are highly educated but can't find jobs in their homeland, sometimes because they just don't have the right "padrenos," or connections, Lota said. Here, they hope to find more opportunities.

By coming here, he and his wife gave up many comforts, Lota said. For one thing, he has given up on finding a job as a commercial pilot here; they're not in much demand, he said.

"It is a sacrifice on our part, but we have to sacrifice because of our children," he said. "We want to give our children a better future."