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Dancing the Shrimp

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Dancing the Shrimp

Jim Kenny



Filipinos have been immigrating to Louisiana since 1765, when sailors began jumping ship from Spanish galleons plying the Gulf of Mexico. Others continued to stream into Louisiana from the Philippines throughout the 1800s long after the galleon trade ended. Most of these arrivals were seamen as well who practiced their trade at St. Malo, a fishing and shrimping community in St. Bernard Parish, and later Manila Village, a Filipino settlement in Plaquemines Parish that became the center of the shrimp drying industry in the region in the 1890s. Still more Filipinos settled in Gretna, on the Westbank of New Orleans in the mid 1800s, and in the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood of the city by 1910.

Despite such a fascinating history, very few Louisianans know anything about what were probably the earliest Asian settlements in the United States. My wife, Isabel Enriquez Kenny, a Filipino-American, and I were unaware of this "invisible" ethnic group in south Louisiana, too, until we moved to New Orleans from Boston and met Marina Espina, a librarian at the University of New Orleans who had researched the lives of early Filipino settlers. It became apparent after our first meeting with Ms. Espina and a few of the descendants she was using as sources, that there was a need for disseminating the Filipino-Louisianan story to a statewide and nationwide audience. Information about Filipino-Americans in general is scarce despite the fact that until recently they were the largest Asian ethnic group residing in America.

Interpreting a Culture on Film

After receiving major funding from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities and supplemental funding from the Louisiana

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Division of the Arts, my wife and I and a group of film professionals set out to do the exciting and daunting work of shooting and editing a documentary. We knew the content had inherent interest to us, but how could we make the Filipino-Louisianan story interesting to a broader audience with diverse ethnic backgrounds?

First, there was the universal theme of the great American "melting pot" with which most immigrant Americans and their descendants could relate. According to this theory, people of many different nationalities who have made the United States home of successive generations will eventually shed their ethnic identities and become cast in a new homogeneous "American" identity. The major flaw with this theory has always been that it exclusively refers to those of European descent, most of whom share common features, traditions and values. The "melting pot" never intended to include African- or Asian-Americans who are racially and culturally distinct. Yet, as our film shows, the experiences of eight generations of Filipino-Americans refutes the "melting pot's" narrow exclusivity and illustrates a unique example of cultural adaptation and assimilation. We intended from the start to explore why Filipinos came to settle in Louisiana and how well they were able to adapt to the existing culture while maintaining remnants of the culture they left behind.

During early conversations with Filipino-Americans, we discovered that many of these descendants were engaging storytellers. Their anecdotes could be easily woven into an absorbing oral history, without the need of an all-knowing narrator telling the viewer what to think about the images and personages presented. Our subjects were remarkably at ease on film. During one serendipitous scene, the Burtanog sisters, fifth-generation Filipino-Americans, gave us a tour of their old neighborhood, the Faubourg Marigny district of New Orleans. During the shooting of an interview on the steps of their childhood home, the current occupant emerged and began loading items into his car. Meanwhile, the sisters peeked into the doorway to see the present-day interior. After initially stopping the filming, I signaled the director of photography to resume shooting. What followed was a wonderful, impromptu, fluid dance between the camera operator and the subjects as they spontaneously erupted with stories about the house and their childhoods.

The surprised occupant at first listened politely but then was drawn into this fascinating bit of history about his house. Audrey Burtanog King, the eldest sister having trouble with her legs, reenacted a memorable adolescent memory when she stood at the top of the stoop and

innocently announced that she went to her first formal dance from here at the age of fourteen. May, a former Mardi Gras queen, recounted how the family was once cited by the city for having a chicken coop in the backyard. After a city inspector was dispatched, he told the Burtanogs that theirs was the cleanest chicken coop he had ever seen.

We spent a great deal of time filming the Burtanog sisters because of the well documented history of their family. They possessed an ample array of vintage photographs dating back to Felipe Madigral, their Filipino forefather who first settled in the New Orleans area in the 1830s. Audrey, who was stricken with polio as a child, has become the family historian having stayed at home with the "old folks" during her youth listening to their stories. Felipe Madigral, she explained to us, was sent to Mexico by his wealthy, ship-building family to become a priest. Once in Mexico, however, Felipe revolted and ran away to become a seaman. While docked in Ireland, he fell in love with one of the ship's passengers, and by the time the two reached New Orleans they decided to marry. The bride's parents, who were traveling with her, disowned their daughter and traveled north on their original route. She never heard from them again. This was the Burtanog family's beginning in Louisiana.

Eager to Share Their Heritage

A genuinely gifted storyteller was Isabel Gedoria Welch. Her face would radiate as she recalled days living in Manila Village learning to paddle a pirogue, swimming along the shell-based shoreline or joining her father on a shrimping expedition. Later her eyes would fill with tears as she recalled her father's last days, his mind slowly slipping away, talking about returning to the Philippines with his wife and two daughters. As she recounted the story of moving to the city so that she could attend school, her voice changed to that of a perplexed little girl who asked her mother "What am I?" Only then did she learn that she was Filipino. "Riggie," as she is known by all who befriend her, shared with us her collection of photographs and sketches she had drawn from memory of Manila Village and the small community of Cabanash. Her description of the final phase of the shrimp drying process practiced by Filipino fishermen inspired the title for our film. After boiling and drying shrimp on a large plat-

form, she explained, the Filipinos would put on special boots and "dance on the shrimp" to remove the shells.

Personally, a favorite shoot was the day our film crew was escorted out to Manila Village and Clubhouse, another shrimping community along Barataria Bay. As we glided silently through these two "ghost towns," I could almost feel the presence of the former Filipino inhabitants. The monolithic posts of Manila Village were stark remnants of a once vibrant shrimping community. It was equally interesting to see our guide's reaction to setting foot on the marshland where Manila Village once stood. He had recently recorded his father's recollections of living there. So, although Ben had never been to Manila Village, he knew the former layout of the camp: where the drying platform, houses, general store, boiling shed and walkways had been located. As Ben stood on the shell-based beach looking about and shaking his head, he admitted that he could not understand why his people would want to settle in such an inhospitable location. He understood from his father's stories that it had been a very hard life. Yet, there was also a glint of nostalgia in his eyes when he spoke of the strong sense of community that had existed there. Certainly, there were hardships, but they were shared hardships. Ben stood there as a descendant who longed for a stronger grasp of the culture of his father and grandfather, but thankful for the comforts they bought for him through their sacrifices.

Descendants and Newcomers

The Burtanog's story was told in several segments since each dealt with a different though related topic or theme. Their recurring presence served as a unifying reminder of the enduring residency of Filipinos in Louisiana. They are as much a part of Louisiana history and, from all appearances, had adapted to the culture as well as any other ethnic group. Although they look Filipino and maintain their connection with their ethnic culture, they decidedly sound like native New Orleanians with their distinctive "yat" accent and hold pronounced American viewpoints and values. It is this curious blend of Filipino and Louisiana culture that makes their story so unique. It is through them that we saw why the state was so receptive to Filipinos. As our primary scholar for the film, Dr. Joseph Logsdon, pointed out the French-Spanish culture of south Louisiana held many similarities to the culture Filipinos left behind, including cuisine, religion and tradi-

tions such as Mardi Gras. Since many were fishermen, they fit in easily with the lifestyle of the bayous.

In the second half of the documentary, we focused on recent Filipino immigrants. Through their presence, viewers become more aware of how far removed the descendants have become from their roots. We deliberately returned to the Burtanogs twice during the editing process to help illustrate this point. The recent immigrants are very much aware that they are still outsiders in their adopted land. They relate how they are kept separate by their accents and facial features. Viewers see them at a number of Filipino gatherings at which they stress the importance of maintaining the culture for their children. Unlike their predecessors, the recent Filipino immigrants have come in larger numbers and are primarily professional and educated. They have arrived with higher expectations for themselves, but they are also more sensitive to the nuances of discrimination they encounter. Some came to the United States to escape misery, but most have come to find greater economic opportunity. To return to the Philippines as an American carries a good measure of status. Unlike the early settlers, the recent immigrants can and do travel to the Philippines for periodic visits. In one segment we visited Ely Catolos' store which sells Filipino crafts alongside "mammies" and other New Orleans souvenirs. In a separate section of the store she takes in dry cleaning and sells Filipino food to a mostly Filipino clientele. Hers is an intriguing example of adaptation by a recent immigrant.

My wife and I also carefully constructed transitions in the film to show the connections between the two groups. As an image dissolves from recent immigrants celebrating mass at a Philippine Independence Day picnic, viewers continue to hear the song of the celebrants as the old neighborhood church of the Burtanogs is revealed. The overriding impression is one of continuity of backgrounds between the two groups. Later, however, viewers discover that conflict exists between descendants and new arrivals when while viewing images of the Filipino Club established by the descendants is heard the voice of Rhonda Fox, a sixth-generation Filipino, who says that recent immigrants never attend the club's functions even though the descendants consistently attend the recent arrival's social gatherings. Subsequently it is explained that recent immigrants feel that they have little in common with the descendants who appear to them already Americanized. These unpleasant revelations are mollified by the poignant confession of Ely Catalos that she cried often when she first arrived because she was so lonely.

As documentarians we strived to achieve a truthful and balanced presentation of the Filipino experience in Louisiana from a variety of perspectives. The viewer is given the opportunity to experience each viewpoint and perhaps come to a better understanding of complex issues. One can both understand the plight of recent immigrants who are preoccupied with waging personal battles of accommodation to new values and the indignance of the descendants who feel shunned by these newcomers.

The final minutes of *Dancing the Shrimp* address the future of Louisiana's Filipino-Americans and, by extension, other ethnic groups. There is hope of reconciliation as viewers watch the marriage of two Filipinos, one born in the Philippines but raised in America and one a recent arrival. They speak with great conviction about raising their children with Filipino values and exposing them to customs and traditions of their homeland. Viewers see both husband and wife say emotional farewells to their parents and understand the exceptional strength of the parental bond in Filipino families. Yet, in spite of these strong bounds, the final sound bites from members of the Burtanog family remind us that adaptation and assimilation into the larger American culture is inevitable. To what extent, particularly for those of Filipino and Asian heritage, is still yet to be determined.