

## The Halcyon Days

Foreword: I wrote this essay in 2002, shortly after creating and uploading the Orosa website, [www.orosa.org](http://www.orosa.org). Minor changes have been made to bring it up to date.

Why bother with the Orosa website, with its genealogical data, pictures and stories that would bore the younger generation? After all, today we have Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. To preserve our heritage, that's why. My father's generation of Orosas were one of a kind. What makes the early generation of the Orosas unique? The eight children of Simplicio and Juliana, aka Lola Kanang, were overachievers, back when the word hadn't yet been invented. Raised by a young widow with meager resources, they all completed college, three of them in the United States. This would be exceptional even today, but think of this achievement in the period starting in 1906! Yes, one hundred eight years ago. Among the eight children, there would be a school teacher (**Simplicia**), an engineer (**Vicente**), a physician (**Sixto**), two pharmacists (**Maria and Felisa**), a business executive (**Jose**), a lawyer (**Nicolas**), and a businessman & educator (**Rafael**). All coming from the small town of Bauan, Batangas. Sixto and Felisa also married physicians.

The period of the 1950's was easily the halcyon years of the growing Orosa clan. All seven of Lola Kanang's surviving children were then in their 50's and 60's, occupying positions of responsibility and respect, at the peak of their careers. Sixto was the writer of the family, a trait he passed along generously to his daughters Leonor, Rosalinda and Helen. Sixto was one of the earliest graduates of the newly formed University of the Philippines, marrying his medical school classmate Severina Luna. They created a formidable intellectual and professional partnership. How many women do you know became physicians in the period before WW I? Not many I bet. Sixto wrote a book, "the Sulu Archipelago and its People," published by the World Book Co. of New York in 1923. With the never ending turmoil in that region, Sixto's book reveals timeless insight. He knew, served and earned the respect of the Muslim leaders of those days. He became a friend of Hadji Butu, the first Muslim to serve in the Philippine Senate. Sixto has been recognized as the founder of the Philippine provincial hospital system.

Graduating from the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana in 1911, Vicente served continuously in the Philippine government for a almost five decades, rising to cabinet level, serving under Presidents Manuel Roxas, Elpidio Quirino, Ramon Magsaysay and finally Carlos Garcia. In the 1950's he was winding down a government career that would span 47 years. The University of Illinois awarded him a Distinguished Alumnus Award in 1959, joining an elite company of awardees that included Nobel prize laureates. Vicente was only sixteen years old when he went from Bauan to faraway Cincinnati, Ohio to finish his high school study in 1906. You can read the biography I wrote at:

<http://orosa.org/Alaala%20sa%20Aking%20Ama.pdf>

Maria was the second of Juliana's children to receive an American education. She first earned a Pharmaceutical Chemistry degree in 1918, followed by a Bachelor of Science in 1920 and Master of Science in Pharmacy degree in 1921, all from the University of Washington in Seattle. She received a posthumous award from the American Red Cross immediately after World War

## The Halcyon Days

It for her services in helping American civilians interned by the occupying Japanese. Many literally owe their lives to Maria's supplying food and medicine. Ironically, Maria lost her life during the liberation of Manila in early 1945, in what we would refer to today as collateral damage. The building she was in was the recipient of artillery from the liberating American forces. Additional honors for Maria came by having a street in Manila named after her in 1969, the only Orosa ever so honored. The Orosa ancestral hometown of Bauan also named a street after Maria. I wrote an essay about her at:

<http://orosa.org/Maria%20Y.%20Orosa,%20Entrepreneur.pdf>

Jose was the third of the siblings to graduate from a U.S. institution, first receiving a business degree from the University of Washington in Seattle in 1923 and then earning a Master of Business Administration from Columbia University in New York City in 1925. Jose rose to become the general manager of H. E. Heacock, an upscale store on the Escolta, the premier shopping street of Manila before the advent of the mega malls. What is even more significant is that he was the first Filipino chief executive of the American owned Heacock's. If you wanted the top American brands of watches, jewelry and appliances of the 50's, Heacock's is where you shopped. Nothing made in China then. Later on he was called into public service to head the government's National Marketing Corp. or Namarco. He became President of the Manila Rotary Club, the most prestigious of all Philippine Rotary clubs.

Nicolas was a corporate lawyer for the Hongkong & Shanghai Banking Corp., a blockbuster of a bank then and now. (The bank is now called HSBC internationally.) Nicolas was admitted to the Philippine Bar in 1927.

Most of the family lived in the Manila area, the only exceptions being Rafael and his family who lived in Aplaya (a district of Bauan), and Felisa, who lived with her physician husband Dr. Vicente Ylagan in Calauag, Quezon, southeast of Manila. Felisa and Vicente operated a pharmacy in Calauag and owned land devoted to copra (dried coconut) production. Their pharmacy and house was a block from Lamon Bay, which opens into the western Pacific ocean. We spent some summer vacations frolicking in Lamon Bay.

Lola Kanang had supported her young family by operating a small store or almacén, akin to the sari-sari store of today. Rafael continued operating the store, perhaps more for sentimental than commercial reasons. Rafael co-founded a private high school in Bauan that has one of the country's top folk dance ensembles, rivaling the fabled Bayanihan. The dance troupe, called Sining Kumintang, travels regularly abroad and has performed in every major capital.

Living in close proximity, the family could call for a family get together on a moment's notice. There was an occasional grandson or granddaughter who was abroad for studies, training or touring, but it was infrequent. No one had yet immigrated. Juliana's grandchildren were also making their own mark. **Cesar O. Ilagan** (son of Simplicia) became a physician. Although trained as a lawyer, **Sixto L. Jr.** or "Ting" founded the bank that later became Equitable PCIB. He wrote a book "Banking Anyone?" about his banking career. **Apolinario** or "Naring" (son of Rafael)

## The Halcyon Days

was a Fellow at Oxford University in England, appointed to the Presidential Economic Staff in 1966 by then President Ferdinand Marcos. He became Director-General in 1970. **Augusto** or "Toto" (son of Vicente) capped almost five decades of banking by becoming Executive Vice President of the Philippine National Bank. He had an encore career as president of Filipinas Bank and Overseas Bank. **Leonor** was named National Artist for Dance in 1976. She was the founder of the Filipinescas dance troupe, publishing the coffee table book "Dances of the Emerald Isles." For years she wrote a regular newspaper column called "Arts and Minds." **Rosalinda** still writes a twice weekly column for the Philippine Star. Rosalinda was a recipient of Premio Zobel, awarded to Filipinos for their excellence in Spanish writing. **Helen** authored the biography of Maria. **Conrado O. "Dado" Ilagan** (son of Simplicia) studied engineering at the University of Seattle and became a building contractor, constructing the Philippine Village near the airport.

The Orosa family reunion was an annual event during the postwar years, usually held in January. With the clan numbering less than a hundred (vs. 350 today), reunions were held alternatively in the homes of those in Manila, or in restaurants. As our numbers grew, they began to be held exclusively in restaurants. The Selecta on Dewey Blvd. was a favorite, famous for its ice cream, still marketing the Arce family brand today. (To show how good they were, the original Selecta brand was bought by Unilever.) Lola Kanang dispensed silver coins to the young grandchildren. We each received 3 silver pesos, more than half a day's wage for a factory worker at that time. Those were real silver too.

Another annual event was the birthday of Lola Kanang in August. She always picked a Chinese "*panciteria*" in the heart of Manila, down in Quiapo or Binondo. We loved those dinners. Seven, eight, nine or more courses, one after another. I don't recall a cake or singing Happy Birthday. We just made "*mano*" to Lola and ate heartily.

For the Orosa clan of Juliana and her seven surviving children, life during the 1950's was sweet indeed.

Today we are scattered all over the globe, a microcosm of the Filipino diaspora. Perhaps as much as 35% permanently live abroad today vs. none back then. Entire families have immigrated. Getting together for a 1950's style reunion would be an impossibility. Numbering 350 direct descendants, Orosas now live in Australia (Sydney, Brisbane, Perth), Canada (Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver), Singapore, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom (London and Edinburgh), Sweden, with the most numerous in the United States (California, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Texas, Virginia). Previously, some lived in Africa, Indonesia, Malaysia and Japan. Of course the majority still live in the Philippines but opportunities have compelled many of us to immigrate and take citizenship elsewhere, an unforeseen and heretical thought back in the 1950's. The only reunion possible today would be via virtual reality, tele-conferencing, web cams!

## The Early Days, Path to Excellence

To support his family, Simplicio worked as a ship captain of a "*bate*" that traded between Batangas, Mindoro and points beyond. There is little information regarding this phase of Simplicio's life. Sixto provides a brief account of Simplicio's seafaring activities in his book "I Remember My Father." Sixto talked about Simplicio going to Manila to purchase merchandise for resale in Aplaya, after Simplicio's transition from a seafaring career to retailing. Simplicio's stores were referred to by Sixto as "*sari-sari*" or the same terminology we use today for those ubiquitous Philippines institution that is part and parcel of the Filipino's daily life. However, in the story of Aplaya titled "Window on the Sea" written by the late Mr. Eugenio C. Ingco, Simplicio's stores were referred to as "*almacines*" which is a cut above the sari-sari. The two accounts are consistent in describing Simplicio's previous maritime life, Ingco referring to him as a retired sea captain. Ingco described how the Orosa couple "acquired vast tracts of land in Mindoro<sup>1</sup>." I have no recollection of anyone mentioning these holdings unless they were sold or disposed of shortly after Simplicio's passing. Sixto would have definitely noted such holdings. If Ingco's contention was true, then Simplicio must've been very very successful in the years between the end of the Philippine-American War and his passing in 1910. However, I believe the Mindoro Orosas whom Ingco referred to are another branch.

The father of Juliana merits a brief mention at this point. I say brief because all I've been able to find are some records of Pedro Ylagan selling *carabaos* (water buffalo) on a number of occasions. So, either he was a farmer disposing of extra livestock or raising carabaos for a living.

After Simplicio passed away in 1910, Juliana supported herself and her young brood by continuing to operate the sari-sari or almacén started by her husband. At Simplicio's death in 1910, the children ranged in age from six to twenty two. The three eldest were already out of the house. Vicente was in the United States, working on his engineering degree, Sixto was in medical school at the University of the Philippines in Manila and Simplicia had already married. But undoubtedly it would be a struggle to raise the remaining five on no regular income. No social security then! Within a few years, Maria, the fourth child, would leave to study in the United States, followed by Jose. But Juliana still had three to take care of, Felisa, Nicolas and Rafael.

The new American administration of the Philippines had started to undertake a campaign of universal education under an educator named Dr. David P. Barrows, from the University of California. In another program started in 1903, young Filipinos were selected and sent to the United States for collegiate studies. This was called the "*pensionado*" program and in 1906, sixteen year old Vicente earned a place in the program. Imagine, sixteen years old, Tagalog and Spanish speaking, with limited English, going to a far away and alien land to study. His first stop was Cincinnati, Ohio. The contrast between Cincinnati and Aplaya must've been stark. The "Queen City" was then the sixth largest in the U.S., San Francisco and Los Angeles were much smaller, the reverse of today. From Cincinnati, you could travel throughout the U.S. by railroad or

## The Halcyon Days

via steamer on the Ohio river. Not having finished high school, Vicente was sent to the Cincinnati Technical School, a preparatory school for technical disciplines such as engineering. After finishing there in 1907, he was sent to the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana to study civil engineering. He took extra courses during the summer at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, 400 kilometers or so to the north. After finishing in 1911, Vicente returned to Manila to start his government career. Here is a link to the The Pensionado Story:

<http://orosa.org/The%20Philippine%20Pensionado%20Story3.pdf>

Vicente was already back in the Philippines when Maria became the second of the children to study in the United States. Besides Sixto, Maria is the only one with a formal biography, written by our cousin Helen Orosa del Rosario, so we won't cover the same ground here. Although Maria's purpose in coming to America was to further her education, her presence in Seattle must have been a boon to the family finances. Maria wrote a lot of letters to her mother, the only significant correspondence between any of the children and Juliana that have been preserved. The two had a business operation going, Lola sending merchandise to Maria for resale. Lola sent "*babera ng bata*," "*bata de dornier*," "*vestidos*," "*kamison*," "*abaka*," "*kustal*," "*ternos*," "*bayong*," "*langis*," and "*sombreros*." In one letter sent in 1919, Maria enclosed \$850!. That's right, eight hundred fifty dollars. The average American family income annually during that era was about \$1,000 so they didn't do too badly. Of course they had to deduct their "*puhunan*" or capital and pay freight but it was not a small operation. Maria's letters to her mother have been preserved, and Maria's Tagalog reflects the formality and respectfulness of a bygone era. No Taglish, short cuts or such absurdities. I have transcribed Maria's handwritten letters, they make for interesting reading. At some point Maria was communicating with her mother about importing copra by the hundreds of tons! No small undertaking! These two women were undoubtedly the entrepreneurs of our family. In addition to her studies and importing business, she had to worry about her kid brother Jose, who followed her to Seattle, Washington in 1919. Like Vicente before him, Jose was still a teenager when he arrived in the U.S. So Maria balanced her studies, the import operation with Lola, and mentoring Jose, seven years her junior. We have a few letters from Jose to his mother, referred to as "*inang*." This was Tagalog, but later on the younger generation would switch to mommy, mom or mama. It is interesting that Maria discouraged sending Jose to the United States. He was too young, there were a lot of Filipinos in Seattle that could be a bad influence, they were carousing instead of studying, etc. Obviously, Jose made it without a misstep.

But by the late 1920's, with the return of Jose from New York, all of the family were in the Philippines, living in Bauan, Manila and other provinces. Vicente was assigned to various regions of the country as an engineer, building roads, bridges, irrigation systems, etc. for the government. Vicente, his wife Rosario and three children (my sister Charito and I weren't around yet) were in Malolos, Bulacan. Dr. Sixto and his family were in Negros Occidental.

It may have been an early family reunion in Manila, but we may never know. They would have numbered less than 40 then including the spouses. The family posed for a formal photograph in 1932, one of the photos<sup>2</sup> that is on our Orosa home page. With the exception of Maria, all were

## The Halcyon Days

married, ranging in age from 44 (Simplicia) to 28 (Rafael.) Nearly 70, there is a hint of a smile on Juliana's face. She had done her job. Against great odds, she raised that family whose achievement will be difficult to equal, not in terms of wealth, but in terms of excellence in their undertakings. Without reading any how to books, they had pursued excellence, and overtook it. And their integrity was beyond question.

Link to photo: [http://orosa.org/images/Home%20Page/Lola\\_\\_Family\\_1932.jpg](http://orosa.org/images/Home%20Page/Lola__Family_1932.jpg)

### Epilogue:

There are no longer any Orosas living in Bauan. The ancestral home in Aplaya, less than a block from the beach of Batangas Bay, has been sold. (The name Aplaya comes from the Spanish a playa or to the beach.) The house has been torn down by the new owners. Even the final resting place of Lola Kanang, located in the parish church grounds, has been moved to make room for church expansion.

### Footnotes:

1 One branch of the Orosas, a cousin of Simplicio via his uncle Basilio, did migrate to Mindoro and did well. But Ingco's statement is emphatic, it was Simplicio and Juliana that acquired the land, not other Orosas. I believe Ingco erred, it was Simplicio's cousin Isabel who moved to Mindoro, marrying Pedro Aceron, in the town of Pola. Their descendants still own the land. One Isabel's great granddaughters became Vice Governor of Mindoro.

2 I am indebted to the late Sixto "Ting" Orosa Jr. for this family photograph which he sent me during his retirement years in Vancouver, Canada. Ting said he was sure 1932 was the year it was taken. Ting graduated as Valedictorian of the Negros Occidental High School in 1932, when he was 16.

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