

A Long Way From Iba

Iba, Zambales is the hometown of my mother Rosario Venzon Escobar. Starting from her grandfather, Juan Escobar Sr., there are more than 400 living descendants scattered across the globe. Like the Orosas leaving Bauan, the Escobars left Iba in droves. But at least in Iba a few Escobar families remain to this day.

This story is about the first Escobar and first relative who immigrated to the United States. He was my mother's uncle, Braulio Escobar. He preceded the wave of Orosa and Escobar immigration by more than half a century. Braulio was born in Iba in 1889. He came to the United States in 1908 after joining the U.S. Navy. The motivation would have been simple. My mother's elder sister born in 1895 wrote about how hard life was then. You had to grow your own food, cook with firewood with the only light at night coming from an oil lamp. Bring water from a well to the house. It is questionable if Braulio even had a high school education, which was not required at the time. He initially served for 3 decades, retiring in 1938. By the time of his retirement, he was a Chief Commissary Steward. Although he was past 52 at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, he was recalled to service for the duration of World War II. He served on destroyers and destroyer escorts, the USS Wilkes, USS Drury and USS Putnam and was mustered out at the Lakehurst Naval Air Station in New Jersey. His total service in the United States Navy was more than 38 years.

This was an era when the great majority of Filipinos immigrating to the U.S. were agricultural workers, doing the same work that Latinos are now doing across the country. The exclusion act of the 1880's left the Chinese out, so it was Filipinos and Japanese who worked the fields. For Filipinos the work was in California and Hawaii. They cut sugarcane and picked pineapples in Hawaii; planted and harvested vegetables in California's central valley. Some made it to Alaska to work in the canneries during the salmon run. Filipinos also were joining the U.S. Navy, working as mess stewards and cooks. I've heard stories where as soon as a Filipino enlisted in the Navy, he was sent to cooking school. But compared to the field workers, at least Braulio had decent quarters, nutritious food (I assume Navy food is), health care, good pay and a lifetime pension. Somehow a tradition of Filipino stewards went all the way to the White House starting with Franklin Roosevelt. There is a iconic picture of a smiling Harry Truman in Potsdam standing behind ten Filipinos in their formal Navy uniforms. The Navy mess stewards in the White House were still Filipinos up to the time of President H.W. Bush. They are mostly retired now and there is another generation of mess stewards that aren't Filipino. But at least the Executive Chef is a Filipina.

In his personal life, the 5' 3" tall Braulio was a colorful man. He married 4 times, marrying one wife twice. This particular wife was Helen Kelly, an Irish woman who was his wife when he passed away. Another wife was Myrtle, an African American with whom he had 2 children, Braulio Jr. and Juanita. The third woman he married was Sophie Apostolis who was of Greek heritage. They had 2 children, John and Cynthia, who was called Toni. Auntie Toni, as I called her, was the youngest and last surviving child. She passed away in September of 2011 at the age of 69. She was the only one in Braulio's family that I've had contact with on a regular basis.

Braulio was killed in an automobile accident in 1969. Although 80, he was healthy and still working. There are now 3 generations of his descendants living in New Jersey, Oregon and California. His children diverged, the children by Myrtle going west. The children by Sophie stayed in New Jersey. The generations that survive are his grandchildren (my second cousins), great grand children and great great grandchildren. A namesake grandson Braulio (III) practices law in Oregon. Braulio never went back to the Philippines to visit his siblings or his numerous nephews and nieces which included my mother. None of his family has ever visited the Philippines either. I call them the American Escobars, with no ties to Braulio's homeland. The

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youngest generations are only one/eight to one/sixteenth Filipino. They couldn't be called Filipino Americans anymore. Some may not even know they have a Filipino ancestor or ever wondered where the name Escobar originated. This is the great American experience, identical to what all other nationalities and ethnicities went through, intermarrying and becoming mainstream.

With the explosion of genealogical information on the internet and the social media, we can track where Braulio's heirs went. The west coast Escobars maintain a web page under 1 of the numerous heritage or ancestry type sites. However it is not public and is for members only. I have been privileged to be included. The east coast Escobars are all over Facebook. I hope to communicate with them 1 of these days. The oldest among them, grandchildren of Braulio, may have stories to tell about grandpa.

Although still somewhat of a backwater, Iba has had some growth. There is now a Jollibee and maybe a McDonald's will follow. That is a sure sign that a town anywhere in the world has arrived, when McDonald's decides it is ripe for a franchise. But the best part about Iba is its beaches. Facing the South China Sea (wish we could change that name), the beach extends the full length of Zambales province. The water is warm, calm and inviting. A few corals can be found offshore. The locals claim that Zambales mangoes are the most juicy and succulent but every Philippine province makes that claim. Some enterprising Europeans have started small resorts in Iba and elsewhere along the Zambales coast and throughout the archipelago. So there is a place for you to stay.

Stories of Braulio abound among my older Escobar cousins to whom he was known as *Lolo Boyong*. Braulio and his generation were never much for diaries or accounts of their exploits. But *Lolo Boyong* served his adopted country well and founded a clan of mainstream Americans. Here's to you, *Lolo Boyong*. I hope Braulio's descendants and for that matter my descendants as well, visit Iba someday.