

## Behind the Pensionado Story

### Foreword:

My interest in the pensionados was rekindled after recently receiving a note from someone researching her pensionado grandfather. She had found “The Philippine Pensionado Story” which I had written in 2005 and linked to the Orosa website. In reviewing the references to the pensionados currently available in various websites, it is obvious that the quality of information has not improved. It has gotten worse, to the point of misinformation. The following is typical: *“The elite class of rich Filipinos known as “pensionados” was allowed to come to America to learn in American universities.”* Here’s from a university professor in Illinois as quoted by the Filipino American Curriculum project of the Smithsonian Institute: *“Established in 1903, the pensionado program provided government scholarships to students supposedly chosen by merit from each Philippine province; in actuality, local prominence and connections played a major role in the selection process.”* And to top it off, this is from Wikipilipinas: *“During the first decade of the American occupation, most of the pensionados were women from the elite class.”* In fact there were no women in the first batch that left in 1903 and very few in later batches. None of these authors or website developers did their homework. Below are some basics, with links to the players involved and references.

### Pensionado Basics:

The Philippine Pensionado program was established under the Second Philippine Commission via [Act No. 854](#), enacted on August 26, 1903. This was “An Act providing for the education of Filipino students in the United States and appropriating for such purpose the sum of seventy-two thousand dollars (about \$2 million in today’s dollars), in money of the United States.”

The Act describes the mandatory selection process in exhaustive detail. According to the first Superintendent, the first 100 students were culled from 20,000 applicants from across the archipelago. In 1903, the members of the [Philippine Commission](#) (sometimes called the Taft Commission) consisted of four Americans - Henry [Clay Ide](#), [Dean C. Worcester](#), [Luke Edward Wright](#) and [Bernard Moses](#); plus three Filipinos – [Benito Legarda](#), [Trinidad Pardo de Tavera](#) and [Jose Luzuriaga](#). All were appointed by President [William McKinley](#). The Commission was headed by then Governor-General [William Howard Taft](#), who later became the 27<sup>th</sup> President of the United States and the 10<sup>th</sup> Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. Both Pardo de Tavera and Legarda were associated with the [Federal Party](#) which advocated integration with the United States and statehood for the Philippines.

### Pensionado Founder(s):

There are 2 people who can claim credit for planting the seeds of the program, the first being Commissioner T. Pardo de Tavera and the second [Dr. William Alexander Sutherland](#). Pardo de Tavera wrote in a letter to Governor Taft in 1902 that *“I want them (Pardo’s sons) to be educated in America so that they may be Americans.”* In his book “Brains of the Nation,” historian [Resil Mojares](#) attributes Act. No. 854 to Pardo de Tavera.

Dr. Sutherland was the son of a Methodist missionary serving in Mexico. Sutherland spent his early years in Mexico, becoming fluent in Spanish. After graduating from New Mexico State University at Las Cruces, NM in 1898, he taught briefly in Las Cruces before returning to NMSU to teach Spanish and Latin. After getting married in 1902, Sutherland and his bride left for the Philippines.

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He became the private Spanish secretary to Governor General Taft. According to his memoirs, *“That late afternoon while chatting, I casually remarked that there was one thing I had been thinking we might do that was not being done to help the general wards, who were a new species to us, and we to them. I explained that it was to send a number of carefully selected boys and girls to the United States for 4 years of training and higher education and put them to work in the government after their return. The governor said it sounded good and to write it out and they would think it over. It was done and the (Philippine) Commission approved it.”*

The first batch of pensionados left for San Francisco on Oct. 9, 1903. The screening process must have been started well before the ink was dry on Act. No. 854. A little more than a month passed between the enactment and their departure. Some of the pensionados traveled from the southern islands, as far south as Zamboanga. They came from all over Luzon, from Cagayan and Ilocos in the north to Sorsogon in the south. Testing, grading, interviewing, physical examinations and transporting all of the students to Manila in less than 7 weeks would have been quite a logistical undertaking given the communication and transportation system in 1903.

### Pensionado Stories:

Dr. Sutherland (he obtained his Juris Doctor degree while Superintendent in Washington, DC) wrote his own account of the program titled *“The Filipino Pensionado Story.”* Dr. Sutherland later became President of the New Mexico State University in Las Cruces. All his papers are in NMSU’s archives and not available on the internet. Dr. Sutherland never ceased being a tireless advocate for the education of young Filipinos.

Another account of the program was written by Kenneth W. Munden, called *“[Los Pensionados](#)”*. It is kept at the National Archives in Washington, DC. Unfortunately copies are not easily obtained and not available at rare book stores. Because the works of both Sutherland and Munden are in archives and not yet accessible on the internet, little of the inside story has been disseminated. Their accounts present the closest look at the program, in contrast to the one-liners that proliferate. Sutherland lived and traveled with the initial batch of pensionados and was in touch with the alumni for the next half century.

### Success:

Government programs, especially in education, are judged by its success or failure. By virtue of the accomplishments of the pensionados, the program was successful by leaps and bounds. A very small sampling of pensionado program alumni who served the Philippines or achieved prominence in their endeavors is as follows:

- [Jose Abad Santos](#) – Chief Justice of the Supreme Court at the outbreak of WW II; refused allegiance to the Japanese puppet government in World War II and was executed early in the occupation.
- [Honorita Acosta](#) – first Filipina to graduate from an American medical college; wife of Antonio Sison.
- [Conrado Benitez](#) – first Filipino Dean of the College of Liberal Arts of the University of the Philippines; co-founded Philippine Women’s University with his wife Francisca.
- [Jorge Bocobo](#) – President of the University of the Philippines from 1934-1939. Prior to 1934 he was the first Filipino Dean of the College of Law.

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- [Jose Ma. Cuenco](#) – entered the priesthood after completing his pensionado studies and became Archbishop of Jaro, Iloilo.
- [Francisco Delgado](#) – Resident Commissioner to the United States, Senator and later Ambassador to the United Nations.
- Delfin Jaranilla – Associate Justice of the Supreme Court.
- [Vicente Lim](#) – first Filipino graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point. He was executed by the Japanese during WW II.
- Ambrosio Magsaysay – founder of Magsaysay shipping company, father of artist Anita Magsaysay Ho.
- [Tomas Mapua](#) – founder of the Mapua Institute of Technology, an engineering school.
- [Vicente Y. Orosa](#) – spent forty five years as a public servant, culminating his career as Secretary of Public Works & Communications under President Ramon Magsaysay.
- [Camilo Osias](#) – the first Filipino Superintendent of Schools and later Senator, Senate President and President Pro Tempore.
- Alfonso Ponce-Enrile – the first Filipino member of the oldest and largest American law firm (Fisher, Dewitt, Perkins & Brady) during the American colonial era. Through the years the firm turned from American to Filipino and passed on to Alfonso's son-in-law. Alfonso is the father of Juan Ponce-Enrile, former Secretary of Defense and current President of the Philippine Senate.
- Antonio Sison – became Dean of the College of Medicine at the University of the Philippines; husband of Honoria Acosta.
- [Pedro Tuazon](#) – Associate Justice of the Supreme Court.

Here is a link to the story I wrote in 2005:

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