

Lonny Taylor

My dear friend Lonny Wood Taylor passed away at his home in Fort Davis, Texas on June 26, 2019. Lonny was an author, historian, storyteller, curator, public radio personality, and avid traveler. A bibliophile, he left a cache of 14,000 books. His obituary was featured not only in the local paper, but in the Houston Chronicle, Washington Post, and Boston Globe. That's quite a trick, since Lonny and his wife Dedie's home county in west Texas, where they had lived for the last 17 years, is not anywhere near a large city and has a population density of one person per square mile. The nearest big town is Midland, the locus of the Texas oil patch, population 142,000.

In February of 2008, I received a letter from Lonny, asking if I was the author of a story about Vicente Y. Orosa. He had found the information on my website, www.orosa.org. Unlike a typical letter, Lonny's letter was typewritten on light beige stationery paper with a header. The paper was at least 28 weight, if not 33 - not your ordinary office copy paper. I answered in the affirmative, informing him that Vicente was my father. We started to exchange letters, followed up by email. It was the start of a beautiful friendship.

The wonder of it all is that it took more than 50 years for us to reconnect. We were born within a couple of months of each other, on opposite sides of the globe, Lonny in South Carolina and I in Manila. But shortly after WWII, Lonny, his parents Alonzo and Virginia Taylor, and his grandmother Sue Border Taylor relocated to the Philippines, where they stayed for the next nine years. His father Alonzo Clason Taylor was an engineer with the Bureau of Public Roads (later renamed the Federal Highway Administration), whose task was to help the Philippines rebuild its infrastructure from the destruction of WWII. Alonzo worked closely with my father Vicente, who was then with the Philippine Department of Public Works. The two of them became lifelong friends.

Lonny retained vivid memories of his time in the Philippines from 1946 to 1955. He traveled with his father everywhere in the archipelago, to places where few Filipinos have traveled, then or now. It was a heady and adventurous time for a very young person. He went to the Sulu archipelago in southwestern Mindanao, meeting sword and gun toting Moros. He described a softball game between the Bureau of Roads American and Filipino staff, versus locals, witnessed by hundreds of armed Moros. Even decades later, Lonny never missed an opportunity to talk about the Philippines in some of his Rambles, a weekly column he wrote for the Big Bend Sentinel, a newspaper published in Marfa, Texas. He wrote about dealing with a call center in the Philippines, where call centers are now a major industry, employing hundreds of thousands. Lonny studied at Manila's American School (now the International School), where he had a lot of Filipino classmates. They too, became the subject of a Ramble. He wrote about the Filipino Christmastime custom of decorating houses with star shaped lanterns called *parols*.

Lonny and Dedie liked to travel, taking a train whenever they could. Once, they went across Canada from west to east. When it became necessary to return to their old haunts in Washington, DC, they took the train, too. Unlike Val and me, who like to stay within the comfort zone of an organized tour, Lonny & Dedie didn't follow the crowd. It was not until the fall of 2018

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that they went on a cruise. Lonnn never made it back to Manila. It's just as well, for much of what he remembers have been razed and replaced by malls and condominiums. The population has quintupled. He talked about riding his bicycle all around Manila. That's something one wouldn't do today, with the traffic and air laden with diesel exhaust.

Lonnn had started to write his memoir many years ago. He had sent me a chapter, entitled "In the Province," back when we first corresponded. Then there was a long hiatus. This year, he seemed to have picked up some urgency, saying he had been working on the memoir off and on for 20 years and wanted to finish it. The last emails we exchanged were early in June, when he asked me to review a chapter he had written about my father and our family. He recalled the many visits he made to our home in Manila, and the parties he, his parents, and grandmother Taylor attended there. He described meeting his puppy love during one of the parties. He titled his memoir "The Sun Returning: Memories of a Philippine Boyhood." It may have been taken from the English version of the Philippine national anthem, the first two lines of which are "Land of the morning, Child of the sun returning." Or perhaps the similarity between his title and the anthem was just a coincidence? He was going to send me the 80,000 word manuscript but never got to do so. According to Dedie, he did complete the memoir. It will be published by the University of Oklahoma Press next year. I can hardly wait.

The main part of Lonnn's career was spent as an historian at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington, DC. He wrote many books, some of them anthologies of his Rambles. There were three books on Texas furniture, one about Carpinteros (carpenters) and Cabinetmakers of New Mexico, and "Marfa for the Perplexed." But what I consider his magnum opus was "The Star-Spangled Banner: The Making of an American Icon," written in collaboration with a couple of his Smithsonian colleagues. Most of what Americans know about our flag is based on misinformation. As the head researcher for the book, Lonnn set the record straight. For example, Betsy Ross did not sew the first Stars and Stripes flag. On the 200th anniversary of Francis Scott Key's writing of the words to "The Star-Spangled Banner", Lonnn appeared on the Stephen Colbert show on Sept. 11, 2014. Lonnn gave me an autographed copy of the book, enclosed in its own book sleeve.

Before he retired, Lonnn donated two *ternos* to the Smithsonian. *Ternos* are formal Filipina dresses characterized by butterfly sleeves. They had originally been given to Lonnn's mother and grandmother by my mother as parting gifts. Since the Smithsonian displays only two percent of some 150 million artifacts, it is not likely that we'll see them on display. But there's two *ternos* out there somewhere, having made their way from Manila to Texas to Washington.

When he learned of my interest in the galleon trade, Lonnn gave me the book "The Manila Galleon," written by William Lytle Schurz in 1939. It is the most comprehensive book about the galleon trade. I was reluctant to accept it since it was a collectors item, long out of print, and worth a tidy sum. Nevertheless, Lonnn was willing to part with it to me as a friend.

Farewell, Dear Friend, until we meet again.

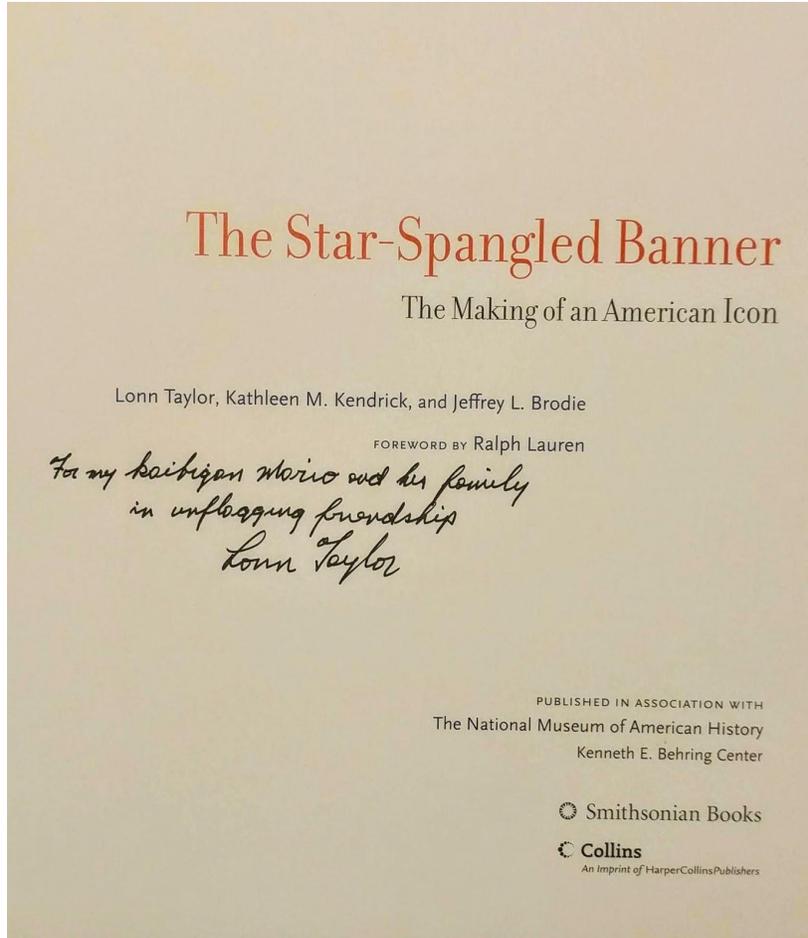
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Mario E. Orosa
Fairfield, OH
August 13, 2019



This is the cover of the book "The Star-Spangled Banner: The Making of an American Icon."

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Lonn's note on the first page of the book. He used the word "kaibigan" which means friend in Tagalog.



With Lonn at the Fort Davis Drug Store and Hotel, which had an old fashioned soda fountain.