



Tracing family roots: hazardous yet amusing

It took the black American writer Arthur Haley about a year to trace his family roots in Africa. It took me exactly a day to trace mine although, to be sure, my attempt was not as thorough. However, it was probably more fun: the "hazardous" adventure turned out to be quite amusing.

Early Saturday morning of last week, we all trooped into a van and headed for Taal. The trip was in response to an overwhelmingly persistent invitation from cousins — all surnamed like me and whom I had never seen — to join them at a picnic in their beach house by the lake.

The purpose was to meet them personally and to trace relationships shown in my father's family tree. That seemed simple enough, but the hydra-headed problem was how to get to our destination: the "barriotic" town of San Nicolas, referred to by historians as "Iumang" or old Taal.

Without a road map, we would get there only if we would decipher some of the most puzzling instructions ever sent by would-be hosts to their hitherto-unknown cousins.

"Turn right on that curve to a very short strip of road punctuated by an old mango tree," the directions said in part. "Old mango tree?" asked my niece Magoo. (Despite the monicker, she doesn't like pizza.) "Just how old?" Magoo asked further.

"When in doubt, ask any pedestrian for the way to the *pantalan* of San Nicolas," we were further instructed in print. "Be sure the pedestrian looks intelligent," I warned the driver as he stopped the van to ask for some help. "Ma'am, here's one who looks very bright, but he's only a little boy. Shall I ask him, anyway?"

Another instruction read: "Turn right to the wide highway and move on until, not too far away, you reach a small bridge over a creek." "Which bridge? Which creek?" we chorused. There were so many small bridges, and so many creeks — most of which had dried up.

With mounting excitement, we read: "In the next five minutes, a big body of water will be beckoning ahead." It was actually another thirty minutes before we saw the "big body of water" and a streamer welcoming us.

"You know, the search for our roots seemed to me more like a two-hour search for routes," Magoo said laughing.



Our hosts greeted us like long, lost cousins, which we were indeed. In the warmth and cordiality of their "Hello's", all the inconveniences, the repeated and spirited debates (on which road to take) were immediately forgotten, especially as the strong, invigorating breeze from the fresh-water lake was blowing in our faces.

"This is the life," I told myself. "No smoke-belching, no dust, no pollution."

Cold drinks and *tamales* were quickly offered us in the two-story bamboo-and-nipa beach house. "Try the *tamales*; you won't regret it," said Miling, a Manila-based cousin who, along with the rest of the guests, had come likewise in quest of family roots.

By the way, the invitation also included this enticement: "Try to arrive early enough for a refreshing dip in the fresh-water lake or a sight-seeing cruise in a motorized banca before a hearty lunch of regional food. An orientation tour of Taal has been arranged after lunch for those interested."

Because early arrivals had already taken their "refreshing dip," and because, it being close to noon we were all famished, household retainers started placing banana leaves over the dining tables for that "hearty lunch of regional cuisine."

And what a hearty lunch, indeed!

After the far-from-modest repast, guests felt guilty about having committed gluttony. The recent Lenten fasting, I imagine, must have led them to gourmandize, for who of them could have resisted the following menu?

• *Adobong manok sa dilao* (yellow chicken; adobo rendered yellow by ginger); *adobong igat sa gata* (eel cooked in coconut milk); *tinindag na ulo nang baboy* (barbecued pig's head); *taghilaw or kilawin* (liver and other internal organs marinated in vinegar); *manok na may kibal* (chicken with string beans); *burong pajo* (green mango salad); barbecued eggplant; broiled *muslo* and *tilapia* (which, like the eel, were caught in the lake only that morning); barbecued pork and, boiled prawns.

(Even my more sophisticated city-bred cousins, headed by Augusto ("Toto"), were quite awed by the fact that the large-sized *muslo* or *maliputo* now sells in Manila markets for P200 a kilo.)

After lunch, there was a choice of fruits: — Indian or carabao mango, watermelon and piña — and native dessert such as *pastillas na makapuno* and *panochang mani*.

To me, however, the peak of our day was not the eating; it was listening to Milagros, seated almost at the top rung of the wide bamboo stairs, harking back to 1760 to describe some of the family ancestors.

(The ones closer to our time were two brothers, Guillermo — (married to Hilaria Agoncillo) whose son Simplicio was my father's father — and Basilio whose son Agaton was the father of our hosts: Ella O. Raquel-Santos, Milagros, Evaristo O. and wife Roseni, Elma O. and husband Jesus Paraiso — our long-lost cousins.

Agaton's grandchildren present at the picnic were Milagros, Cesar and Eden.

Our forbears of long ago were mostly merchants; a number served as *alcaldes* and *governadorcillos* during the Spanish era.

It was of course many years later that Agaton, who died in 1950 at age 76, would come into the picture. What seemed amazing was that Agaton, who became mayor of Taal, outlived four wives, each of them a legitimate spouse!

We also learned that Agaton's father, Basilio, was the baptismal *ainong* or godfather of Senator Lorenzo Tañada. That's really delving into a bit of history, "the grand old man of Philippine politics" being now all of 92.

Laden with both food and facts, guests were ready for that announced tour of Taal, birthplace of my own late father. As an aside, he used to recount to me that shortly after the Spanish-American war ended, drunken American soldiers would scour the town and frighten residents, particularly women and children, by singing rowdily and shooting into the air.

Ella's house, from where we could see my father's birthplace, obviously belonged to a bygone era. I saw a quaintly-shaped bath tub over a hundred years old, antique furniture and picture frames with decor in relief, wide floor boards of Yakal wood so typical of olden times.

Most of us were still "groaning" from the heavy lunch when our gracious hosts beckoned us to a native merienda of *bilo-bilo* (or *pinindot*), *suman*, and *puto* (which looked like giant-sized angel cakes) cooked with slices of salted red eggs.

It would soon be dusk, so we felt we should be on our way. Besides, staying longer could only mean, yes, eating again! After an exchange of profuse gifts and equally profuse goodbyes, we left. But not before realizing with immense pleasure, that strangers had literally turned into kissing cousins. ◊