

The Year I Was Born

There are some birthday greeting cards you can purchase that list the major events of the year of one's birth. I just turned 74 this month and my wife Val gave me a card with an enclosed CD having a compilation of newsreels from 1939. Print cards are so 20th century. While I deeply appreciated her gesture, the newsreels left many questions unanswered. The subjects of the newsreels were mostly American and European. I enjoyed the newsreel of the Chicago Cubs at spring training in Catalina Island. But Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Charles Hughes Sr. delivering a speech to Congress didn't interest me much. The news from Europe was pretty depressing. I was born in Manila, so what happened there and in the Philippines at large? Well, let's find out. Here's what I discovered, in no particular order of priority.

in 1939, the population of the Philippines was 16,000,303. Where did that 303 come from? This census was taken by 35,005 persons employed by the Commission of the Census. They spent \$1.9 million, or 3.8 million pesos at the time. Val wanted to know why it took 35,000 census takers. Well, there are a lot of islands to paddle to and hills (remember *boondoks*?) to climb.

Sailing on the first SS President Cleveland, Francis Bowes Sayre arrived that year, to become the last United States High Commissioner to the Philippines. He was greeted at the dock by Commonwealth President Manuel Quezon and his cabinet. In his first speech, Sayre told the Filipino crowd "we are fellow-Americans."

Retired U.S. Army Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur was the Field Marshall of the Philippine Army. He was tasked with building the armed forces of the Philippines and preparing for its defense. Although War Plan Orange was formulated years before, it was up to MacArthur to revise and execute WPO. It was based on forming a defensive perimeter in the Bataan peninsula in case of an invasion. Although he had left the Philippines by 1939, Col. Dwight Eisenhower was brought in as an assistant by MacArthur.

You could fly between California and Manila on Pan American World Airways' Clipper planes. Pan Am used a four engined Boeing plane, designated as Boeing 314, which took off and landed on the water. Total flying time was 60 hours, with four stops. It was first class all the way, with a separate dining room and sleeping berths. The "airports" were Manila Bay and San Francisco Bay. The round trip fare was \$950. Adjusting for inflation, that would be around \$30,000 today. I'm not sure, but I think my dad made around \$3,000 a year, so the fare would have cost him four months pay.

The most popular actors were real life couple Arsenia Francisco and Jose Padilla Jr., along with child actress Tita Duran and Rogelio de la Rosa. Ms. Duran later married another actor, Pancho Magalona. In a portend of events to come, De la Rosa became a politician and was elected Senator in 1957. I say portend because the Philippine political landscape is full of former actors and entertainers. At the time, the Philippine movie industry had not yet started its annual best picture, actor, etc. awards.

Ceferino "Bolo Punch" Garcia became the world middleweight boxing champion. Filipino boxers

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have won world titles in weight classes from flyweight to light middleweight, but only Garcia has won in the 160 pound middleweight division. That is the heaviest class ever won by a Filipino fighter.

The best tennis player in 1939 was Felicisimo "Might Mite" Ampon. Barely over five feet tall, Ampon is the best Filipino tennis player of all time. He is the only Filipino to have competed in the majors, Wimbledon, French Open and U.S. Open. Joining the Philippine Davis Cup team in 1939, he led the team for the next 29 years.

Basketball is the favorite sport of vertically challenged Filipinos. The NCAA collegiate league was the most popular basketball organization. De la Salle College defeated their arch rival Ateneo de Manila for the championship. The final score was 27 - 23. Now playing in a university league, these two continue their rivalry. It puts the Ohio State - Michigan football rivalry to shame.

The favorite drinks of Filipinos were Coca-Cola and San Miguel beer. Some things never change.

Two Philippine pesos were worth \$1. Today, it takes 43 pesos to buy a dollar.

85 percent of Philippine exports went to the United States. There were no tariffs on the mostly agricultural products such as sugar, coconut, copra, tobacco and lumber.

Traffic was English style, driving on the left instead of the right. This was changed after the war.

One of the biggest corporations was Compañia General de Tabacos de Filipinas, better known as Tabacalera. They made premium cigars at a time when every prominent male smoked cigars.

Benjamin Cayetano was born to Filipino parents in Honolulu. He would become the first Filipino American state governor.

Singer Pilita Corrales was born in Cebu. Still active, with a career spanning six decades, Pilita sings in Tagalog, Spanish and English. Check out her songs on iTunes.

Actor, and later presidential candidate, Fernando Poe Jr., was born in Manila. His father was another actor, Fernando Poe Sr. Jr. lost the 2004 election to Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

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