

What Lies in Those Boxes?

There is a lot of hidden history sitting around in those boxes you've got stored in the attic, basement, closets and storage sheds. Maybe even in bank vaults. I am prompted to write this after reading an article in npr.org written by one of NPR's editors. <http://www.npr.org/2017/07/26/537910355/dear-dickie-a-window-into-family-history-through-post-wwii-love-letters>. Her grandmother had written letters to her suitor and future husband, who was in the Army and serving in Japan after WWII. The letters were written in 1947; so for 70 years, they had remained in the envelopes, presumably after the NPR writer's grandfather had read them. The author's father had just recently discovered them.

I do have similar stories, some of which I had written about before. I think the 2 letters my grandfather wrote to my father back in 1907 tops it all. My father, 17 years old at the time, had finished a year at the Cincinnati Technical School, and was on his way to the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana to study civil engineering. The letters remained with my grandmother Juliana, who died in 1958. When she passed away, the box of letters went to her youngest son, my uncle Rafael. After he died in 1989, his eldest son took possession of the letters. Rafael's son Apolinario (Naring) opened the box and found a treasure trove of letters. Naring showed them to my late brother Augusto (Toto), the letters finally ending up with me. Naring just celebrated his 91st birthday, and I hope he doesn't have any box of letters hanging around somewhere. If there were any mementos left at the ancestral home, they are gone forever. The property was sold by Rafael's children some years ago, and the house was demolished by the new owners. A reminder of nearly 100 years of Orosa memories became landfill. But at least a side street bordering the property is named Orosa.

The prolific letter writer was my aunt Maria, who studied and worked for a number of years at the University of Washington in Seattle. Her letters were in the box too. She began writing shortly after her arrival in 1918 and continued until the early 1920s. So until Naring and Toto opened the letters, my grandfather's letters had sat around in a box at the Orosa ancestral home in Bauan, Batangas for 80 years. Maria's letters were untouched for almost 70 years.

Val had an aunt who passed away in 2012, at age 93. A couple of years later, Val and her cousin, the aunt's only daughter, went over her boxes. One letter, written in Polish, was particularly intriguing. When Val and I went on a trip to Poland in 2015, we carried the letter with us, showing it to our young guide in Krakow. He was somewhat taken aback at some of the words, which he didn't quite understand. Since he was our guide for a few days, he asked to take the letter home. The next day, he reported that his father had translated it, remarking that a lot of the words were archaic and used in a

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particular region. His father traced the dialect to eastern Poland around Lublin, at a location where the Ukraine, Belarus and Polish borders meet. So, on Val's maternal side, that is where the family may have come from.

My mother's eldest sister Julita was born in 1895, coming to the U.S. in the early 1970s to be with her daughters in Massachusetts. After she died in 1996, just short of her 101st birthday, her daughter and son-in-law went through her boxes. The letters they found were sent to me. (I must be some kind of informal repository. If in doubt, send it to Mario!) Using the letters, I was able to trace and contact some Escobar relatives. My Escobar grandfather had a half brother named Braulio, who came to the United States during the WWI era, enlisting in the US Navy. He served for nearly 30 years, including WWII. He never returned to the Philippines, not even for a visit. His communications were sporadic. But the letters provided enough clues such that I was able to find and correspond with his surviving daughter Cynthia. Although she passed away without our having met, we have now made connections with cousins whom I call the American Escobars. My great uncle would be the first of what would be five generations of Americans. The first two have passed away, leaving three generations of American born Escobars, some of whom probably don't realize the origins of their grandfather or grandmother's surname. We are now all in touch through Facebook. It all started with a box of letters that sat in a Quincy, MA closet for decades.

So if you've got some dusty boxes squirreled away, held together with twine, please open them. There may be family history waiting to be discovered. There is always the possibility of old treasures too. Such as the painting by Italian master Caravaggio, discovered in a French attic, worth nine figures. Or the painting in a retiree's attic in Sun City, AZ. It has been authenticated as a work of Jackson Pollock, worth eight figures. But it is the family memories that have more of an emotional impact.

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