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The Fascinating Story of the First Filipinos in Alaska

E By **PAOLO CHUA** | Aug 15, 2019

IMAGE WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Many history books have focused on the [Philippines and its ties to many places](#). As resourceful and as resilient as we are, Filipinos have survived in the farthest corners of the world. Surprisingly that includes Alaska where one of the earliest Filipino settlements is found. Alaska's Filipino community dates back to over 200 years ago, and today, it's one of the largest Asian American subgroups in the state.

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The Alaskeros were Filipino migrant workers who spent their summers in Alaska working at salmon canneries.

Many were recruited in the early 1900s as cheap labor after Spain had relinquished the Philippines to the US under the Treaty of Paris in 1898. The Alaskeros played a prominent role of forming the first Filipino-led union of the US, which was the Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 in Seattle, WA. These Filipino workers were an integral part of growing the food industry and bringing seafood to the tables of American families. [Image source: Alaska State Library]? .? .? .? .?

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It's believed the first Filipino arrived in Alaska in 1788 as a crew member in a merchant ship. The galleon, named Iphigenia Nubiana, had traveled long and far to barter sea otter furs. Though no proof has been found of a Manila man on that ship, a year later, more Filipinos were present when two American trading ships made a pit stop in Manila on its way to Alaska. This time around, about 29 Filipinos were on board to make history.

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[Buchholdt's book *Filipinos in Alaska*](#), she even writes of an instance when Tlingit people singled out a Manila man for his appearance and thought he was a part of their tribe. They even went as far as begging him to stay, thinking he was enslaved by Spaniards.



📷 An early stream seine netter. PHOTO BY WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

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In the 1900s, when U.S. colonization was at its full force, Filipinos made their way to America and landed in Alaska, calling themselves Alaskeros. Buchholdt describes how Caucasian workers were housed in heated compounds, which were a luxury compared to the cramp and cold conditions the Filipinos had to live with. Along with the squalid living conditions, the Alaskeros worked the more difficult tasks in the canneries. They loaded and unloaded trucks, as well as sorted, gutted, cleaned, and packed the salmon. The whites, on the other hand, were in charge of maintenance and operations.

The Alaskeros worked in salmon canneries during the summer and traveled to the west to work on farms during the offseason. These men were essentially the first Filipino overseas workers. In 1933, these men founded the [first Filipino-led](#)



📷 Filipino worker's quarters at a salmon cannery in Nushagak, Alaska. PHOTO BY WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

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Even so, Filipinos were a lot luckier in Alaska than in other parts of America. They faced a lot less discrimination in the area due to the early Asian settlements. And in the early 1900s, the Filipino Community was formed in Juneau. Today, the community still exists with this objective: "To foster better and harmonious relationships, understanding, and brotherhood among ourselves and with other ethnic groups, and to keep alive our Filipino heritage, culture, customs, and traditions."

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1.) The CWFLU marching on labor day, 1939, a few years after the murders. [Special thanks to Fred and Dorothy Cordova and the Filipino American National Historical Society for permission to display this image.] 2.) The founding leadership of the Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union in 1933. Virgil Duyungan is on the far left. [Special thanks to Fred and Dorothy Cordova and the Filipino American National Historical Society for permission to display this image.]

The Crazy History of Filipino Spaghetti

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As the largest Asian group in Alaska, there are more than 30,000 Filipinos in the cold state. And many still continue to migrate there. Today, there are a number of notable Filipinos who migrated to Alaska, including the organizer of the first Filipino union Virgil Duyungan, politician Thelma Buchholdt, novelist Carlos Bulosan, professor E.J.R. David, and more.

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