

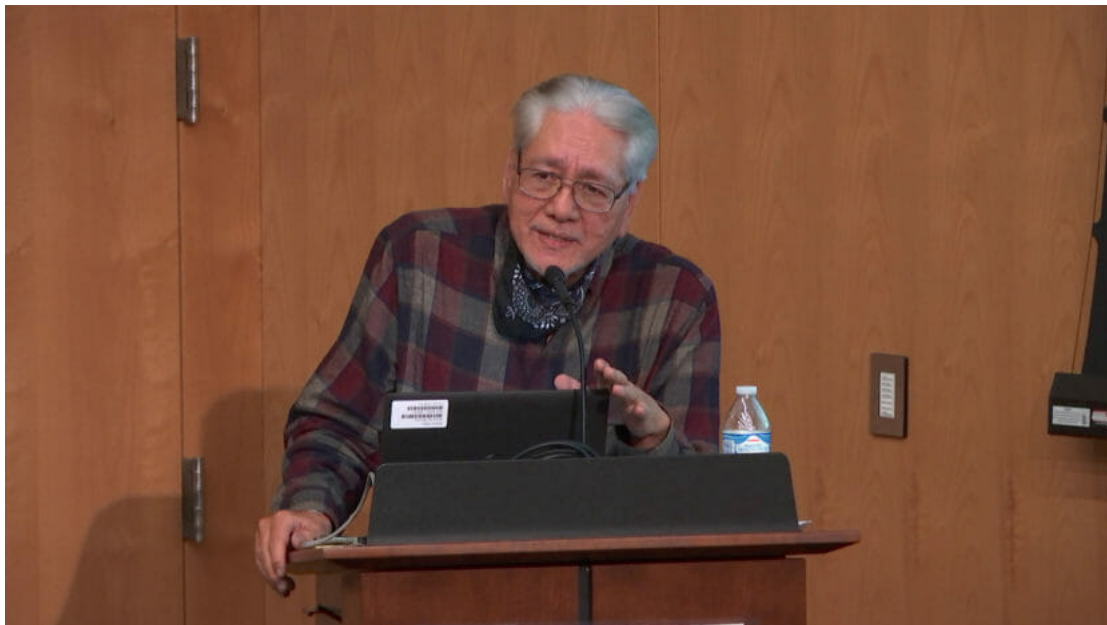
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Filipino American historian and former Alaskero recalls comradery in Alaska canneries

October 12, 2022 by Yvonne Krumrey, KTOO (<https://www.ktoo.org/author/yvonne/>)

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Oscar Peñaranda speaks at the Alaska State Museum on Oct. 7, 2022 (KTOO screenshot)

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Canneries are a big part of Alaska's history. Throughout the 20th century, waves of immigrants – primarily from the Philippines – came to work alongside Alaska Native people in the canneries.

The Mug Up exhibit at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau highlighted this history for the last six months.

The exhibit features lots of historic films and photos. There are black and white posed photos from the turn of the 20th century, and more candid photos taken by friends from the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Some panels explore the histories of the different labor movements that swept through Alaska's canneries.

There's even a recreation of a bunkhouse, with a door covered in names of the workers who slept there from the 1980s to 2009.

Next to it, a mess hall, with a hand-painted table, and a handwritten weekend menu. The backdrop is a photo of young women in hairnets smiling around a table, a few holding cigarettes.





Cannery workers gather on the Diamond NN Cannery dock for a “mug up” in ca. 1976. Mug Up or coffee break gave cannery workers a 15-minute reprieve from the monotony of slime line work and canning machines. (Photograph by Mike Rann)

Jackie Manning is the exhibit’s curator. Her favorite thing is a little cart used to serve coffee to workers during what was called Mug Up time. That’s where the exhibit gets its name.

“When I went up to Bristol Bay, and I saw that little Cushman cart – is what it’s called – and heard the stories about how diverse the canary crew was, and how important that mug up time was for camaraderie and everybody meeting and taking their breaks. And just all the different languages you’d hear on the docks,” she said.

Oscar Peñaranda moved from the Philippines to Canada and eventually to California before coming to Alaska to work in a Bristol Bay cannery in the 1960s. And he kept coming back. He worked 15 summer seasons in Alaska, before deciding to stay in San Francisco full-time.

Now, he’s a historian. He founded the San Francisco chapter of the Filipino American National Historical Society and wrote about his experiences as an Alaskero – the term for Filipinos who worked in Alaska’s canneries.

For Filipino American History Month, Peñaranda was in Juneau last week for the closing of the exhibit. He recognized some names and faces in the exhibit, like the Filipino union leaders who formed the Alaska Cannery Workers Association. They were murdered in 1981, (<https://www.thenation.com/article/society/domingo-viernes-union-reform/>) and he said that’s when he stopped going to work in Alaska.

Peñaranda worked at the cannery for 14 years, even after he started teaching at San Francisco State University and James Logan High School in California.



He said he kept going back for the comradery.

“But the thing was, we didn’t feel like we had to get in touch between seasons,” he said. “Because we were gonna go the next season and catch up. That’s part of the reason why we kept going.”

Peñaranda’s language skills helped him to prosper at the cannery. He speaks four Filipino languages, as well as English, Spanish and some Italian.

“Language is how you see the world. You know two languages, you get two ways of seeing the world,” he said.

It allowed him to work as a sort of peacekeeper between different groups at the cannery.

The labor movements happening in the canneries paralleled his life in San Francisco in the winters. In 1968, he participated in [strikes at San Francisco State University \(https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/03/21/704930088/the-student-strike-that-changed-higher-ed-forever\)](https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/03/21/704930088/the-student-strike-that-changed-higher-ed-forever) that led to the forming of the school’s College of Ethnic Studies.

Peñaranda went on to teach literature and Filipino language in high schools and colleges.

He’s now 78, and he’s thinking of returning to Bristol Bay next summer to work with an old friend. It would be the first time he will have worked at a cannery since he stopped over 40 years ago.

His friend is also in his late 70s and he operates the palletizer – the machine that puts all the cans into pallets to ship out.

Another reason Peñaranda said he kept going back to cannery work was the chance to be a new version of himself.

“When you go work in the canneries and go to Alaska, you can reinvent yourself – you’ll be a completely different you. You don’t like the way you are in San Francisco? Come to Alaska. Make your own reputation.”

So, a different Oscar Peñaranda may return next summer.

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October 20, 2022 by Eric Stone, KRBD - Ketchikan (<https://www.ktoo.org/author/krbd-ketchikan/>)

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Children grab for goodies attached to a pabitin at Ketchikan's Fil-Am Festival on Oct. 15. (Photo by Eric Stone/KRBD)

Ten-year-old Zofia Volkmann opened the festival — which took place at the local high school — with a performance of the Philippines’ national anthem on stage in the high school’s auditorium. High schooler Logenn Merrill followed it up with a performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner” on the violin.

“I stand here today and say with great confidence that fellow Filipino Americans helped build Alaska, and they continue to build Alaska from our hospitals, to our factories, our armed forces, and to our real estate markets,” Peltola said. “To put it simply, the history of the Filipino American experience in Alaska is the history of Alaska itself, and it should never be forgotten.”

Peltola joked about a friend of hers who was born and raised in the Lingít village of Yakutat.

“When they went to college at UCLA, they realized for the first time that adobo was not a Lingít dish,” she said.



Mary Peltola smiles while giving a speech at Ketchikan's 2022 Fil-Am Fest. (Photo by Eric Stone/KRBD)

Out in the commons, political figures were all over the place — lieutenant governor candidates Heidi Drygas and Jessica Cook, Lisa Murkowski aide Chere Klein, and state House candidates Dan Ortiz and Jeremy Bynum were shaking hands ahead of the Nov. 8 general election.

“I love the fact that they’re coming to our table,” said Alma Manabat Parker, who helped organize the event. “It’s truly our table — you can see and smell the food.”

She says boosting voter engagement in the Filipino community is one of her goals as head of the Ketchikan Wellness Coalition’s Sama Sama Tayo program.

“That’s how I proposed this invite,” she said. “Come to us as an opportunity to hear our voices in our own space around our own people.”





Alma Manabat Parker welcomes attendees to Ketchikan's 2022 Fil-Am Fest. (Photo by Eric Stone/KRBD)

Sama Sama Tayo is a grant-funded initiative that aims to improve health care for Filipinos in Ketchikan. And there are some booths you might expect from a health-focused program — PeaceHealth Ketchikan is offering blood pressure checks, and the local public health office is running a vaccination clinic. Another nonprofit has a booth with resources for children with learning disabilities.

But Parker says health isn't just about what shows up on a medical chart.

"Health is mind, body and soul, and our culture is part of that," she said.

And it's around everywhere you look. It's in the air — the smell of Filipino dishes like lumpia and adobo and pancit and more.





The Kusyna ni Mel crew. (Photo by Eric Stone/KRBD)

Danielle Rodriguez is working one of the booths — Kusyna ni Mel, or Mel’s Kitchen. It’s been popular — not even midway through the festival, they’ve sold out of chicken adobo. Rodriguez says she’s glad folks are enjoying the food.

“We want to share our culture and our food with people, and I think food is the best way to share that,” she said.

Among the many highlights is sisig — deep fried pork belly with garlic, onions, ginger and a citrus fruit called calamansi.

“Like a Philippine lemon-lime,” Rodriguez explains.

But there’s much more than food. There’s Filipino trivia. There’s bingo. And on one side of the commons, there’s a rack hanging just a few feet off the floor. It’s decorated in the red, white, blue and yellow of the Philippines’ flag, strung up with streamers, candy and treats.





A pabitin awaits its time in the spotlight at Ketchikan's 2022 Fil-Am Fest. (Photo by Eric Stone/KRBD)

It's called a pabitin — it's a little like a Filipino piñata, except instead of swinging a stick at a papier-mache animal, kids jump to grab the goodies dangling from the structure. Children gather round.

On a balcony high above, a man jerked the pabitin up and down as the kids grabbed for goodies.

KRBD had a booth, too. We set up a mic with a list of questions, and we got a few takers.

Frederick, 28, told us what Fil-Am meant to him.

"Fil-Am to me is being able to enjoy and share my Filipino culture in an open environment," he said. "I think it's important to celebrate heritage to keep culture and tradition alive for future generations."

Grant EchoHawk, 47 and a member of Ketchikan's Borough Assembly, said he was glad for the chance to learn more about the Filipino community.

"It gives all of the rest of us that are not of Filipino descent an opportunity to learn about Filipino history, culture, foods and all the great things that make the Filipino community really, really shine," he said.

Ryan McHale, 27, said he'd like to see Filipino history in Alaska more widely understood.

"I wish more people knew more about how and why our community is as diverse as it is," he said.





*Charlie Jose poses for a photo at his booth at the 2022 Fil-Am Fest.
(Photo by Eric Stone/KRBD)*

At another booth, pediatrician Charlie Jose has a table with an array of photo prints he took in the Philippines over the summer. There's a photo of a dragon fruit orchard. Another features a bunch of bananas hanging outside his family's home.

"If you've ever tasted a banana in the Philippines, and you taste a banana in the U.S., it'll never be the same experience," Jose said.

He says he's glad to have this space to celebrate Filipino history and culture — especially for younger people.

"It's hard to reconnect with your roots in the Philippines if you've lived primarily here," he said. "You also lose some of that culture when you emigrate. I'm an immigrant myself, and I know that I've lost some of my culture, so it's nice to reconnect in different ways, and this is the perfect opportunity to do that."

Ketchikan High School Fil-Am Club President Zarina Cabillo agrees.

"The kids here don't really know anything about the culture because they grew up here, and having this festival is just really, really, really good for them," she said.

She says she'd like to see more people learn the Filipino language, Tagalog, and become certified as translators.

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‘Alaskeros’: Pinoys in Alaska, the original overseas Filipino workers

BY KIMANI FRANCO

PUBLISHED JUN 14, 2021 7:54 PM

“Kabayan!” usually marks the start of an impromptu friendship, one that follows an informal invitation to share Filipino delicacies and exchange stories from home. Or, at the very least, instructions to get to another place in a more familiar language—lips pointing.

Back when traveling was not as complicated and restricted, a cheery, almost comical moment always followed two unacquainted Filipinos abroad realizing they’re both from the Philippines.

Without a doubt, the sentiment of Filipinos being world-class talent is almost closer to universal truth as with the sun rising. It’s not surprising how in parts and corners of the globe, Filipino overseas workers (OFWs) and their communities are recognized for their contributions.

Perhaps one of the least talked about are the Filipinos in Alaska. The Pinoy community in the United States’ 49th state is well known culturally as “Alaskeros.”

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The Pinoy community in the United States' 49th state is well known culturally as "Alaskeros."

One of the earliest Filipinos to arrive in Alaska dates back more than 200 years ago— around 1788. "At least one Manila man was aboard the ship *Iphigenia Nubiana*, under the command of Captain William Douglas, when it arrived at Cook Inlet in Alaska on June 17, 1788," according to the book *Filipinos in Alaska, 1788-1858* by Thelma Buchholdt, one of the leading advocates of Filipino-Alaska heritage and a Filipino-American herself. The book was published in 1996 by Aboriginal Press.

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Filipinos, she said, played an integral role in bolstering the Alaskan economy as many entered fishing canneries in the 20th century.

The comparisons to an early iteration of OFWs are mostly associated with the *pensionados* of the early 20th century Philippines pertaining to Filipinos who went to the United States during the American Colonial period in the 1900s. Laborers migrated in the industries of agriculture and fisheries. Students or government-supported individuals scurried to the academe resembling the modern-day scholarships.

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Throughout the 1900s, an influx of Filipinos entered the working force of Alaska. Since the majority could speak English, they were favored over migrant Chinese workers, as communication with employers and coworkers was more manageable.

Everything wasn't as smooth as the white snow that covered the state. For Filipinos working in the canneries, many experienced discrimination and prejudice that marred their

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In the her book *"Snug Harbor Cannery: A Beacon of the Forgotten"* Katherine Ringsmuth noted in her interview with salmon cannery business owner Barbara Kistler, who said that such was the case with workers of color. "It was just the way things were," said Kistler.



Filipino workers in an Alaskan cannery. Photo from anchorage-museum.org

Social discrimination persisted in the canneries of Alaska, or as author Dorothy Fribrock put it, the “cannery apartheid” for majority of the mid-20th century.

There was at least one event that both Americans and Filipinos seemed to share and revel in equally. It was the festivities every Fourth of July. Not coincidentally, it was only on July 4, 1946, that the Americans granted the Philippines its independence—an identical date when the former broke off from the clutches of the English in 1776.

Some recollections narrate how both races would prepare for the Fourth a month in advance. During the day itself, games in the afternoon were played and some dancing in the evening.

Turning point



Manila Square in Juneau, Alaska. Photo from hmdb.org

Discrimination still targeted the Alaskeros, who were technically US citizens, as an effect of the American occupation in the Philippines. Segregation, for the most part, was glaring between white workers and other ethnicities such as Native Americans and Alaskans.

The groups who were recipients of racism simply because of their skin color eventually banded together. Intermarriages occurred, and as University of Alaska Anchorage professor, E.J.R David said, what came about was the amalgamation of "beaver adobo" and "salmon lumpia."

A cultural syncretism had taken place.

By 1929, the first Filipino community was organized in Juneau, the capital city of Alaska. The contribution of Filipinos in Alaska created a deeply rooted connection not only through its workforce, but in developing a lasting cultural heritage in the region.



A bust of Rizal at Manila Square. Photo from hmdb.org

It was a legacy that was honored by the city and borough of Juneau in 2002, when it dedicated a location in the capital's downtown area and named it Manila Square.

Situated at the intersection of Marine Way and South Franklin Street, a marker was also erected including a bust of Dr. Jose Rizal in honor of the Filipinos' impact on Alaskan society both past and present.

Present-day Filipino-Alaskans' mark in history

Alaska's Filipino heritage is indispensable from our collective history, to paraphrase Buchholdt. The remote nature leading to the formation of a distinct Filipino identity away from the motherland posits the dynamic nature of a nation. More specifically, for a country like the Philippines in which pundits would argue the lack of focus, sometimes an indistinguishable culture from the ones adopted from its colonizers.

In today's COVID-19 reality, the Alaskeros and all OFWs around the world face the same challenges. With almost 10 million OFWs, according to the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) in 2019, these modern-day heroes endure the harsher climates abroad for the same reason—a better opportunity.

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Kimani is a budding creative who indulges in writing about history, video games, and pop culture. He likes eating ramen and talking about himself in the third person.