

## APPRECIATING THE SAKADA CONNECTION IN HAWAII

*By: Romel Dela Cruz  
Big Island, Hawaii*

From 1906 to 1946 approximately 125,00 Filipinos were recruited by the Hawaii Sugar Planters Association (HSPA) to work in the sugar cane and pineapple fields of the Hawaiian Islands.

They were the first Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and called Sakadas meaning lower paid worker recruits from out of the area in both Tagalog and Ilocano languages. In Hawaii the word has become synonymous with these pioneers who came to Hawaii for adventure but primarily to seek their fate or “*gasaf*” in Ilocano and a better life for themselves and their families.

Roughly half of the Sakadas who came to Hawaii returned home to the Philippines or moved to the US mainland after the termination of their three year contracts. The other half remained in Hawaii and are the original roots of the Filipino community today which is now the second largest ethnic group in the State.

In the last 100 years of sugar growing in the islands until the very end of the industry this past December 2016, the Sakadas provided the majority of laborers that nurtured and elevated sugar and pineapple production in Hawaii to its greatest heights and profitability and laid the foundation for the economic growth and stability in Hawaii that has continued to this day.

These pioneers were also in the forefront of labor activism in cooperation with other ethnic groups but sometimes acting alone at great risk (labor leader Pablo Manlapit was jailed in 1924 and deported to California and finally to the Philippines in 1932) and sacrifices (16 Filipinos were killed in a labor related confrontation in 1924 known as the Hanapepe Massacre in Kauai), before, finally gaining recognition and success under the leadership of the International Longshoremen & Warehouse Union (ILWU) in 1946.

On September 1, 1946, the ILWU called for an all island wide strike of the sugar workforce of approximately thirty thousand (30,000) workers consisting of 60% Filipinos (almost all earlier sakadas), 30% Japanese, and 10% others.

Of the workforce that went on strike, six thousand (6,000) were recent Sakadas transported on the USS Maunawili in four separate voyages of fifteen hundred (1500) voyagers each way in January, February, April, and May of 1946.

Previously, the ship was utilized for inter-island cattle transport and departed from Port Salomague in the town of Cabugao, Ilocos Sur then headed north along the northwestern coast of Luzon and then eastward for the Hawaiian Islands.

The voyage of approximately 2000 miles took between 14-17 days to reach its destination and then docked at all the ports of the 4 major islands of Kauai, Oahu, Maui, and Hawaii to deposit its human cargo to be dispersed to all the plantations on each island based on their request and need.

For all intent and purposes, these particular Sakadas were imported to break the Strike that was planned in advance by the ILWU and anticipated by the sugar growers. In earlier times when labor problems were anticipated, the growers purposely brought in new workers of different ethnicity to discourage worker unity but in the early and mid 1900s relied primarily on Sakadas. Previously, the growers succeeded in negating any work interruption but in 1946 they miscalculated.

Despite having arrived only a few months earlier and with little resources and relying primarily on the promise of union assistance and the goodness of earlier Sakadas; these Sakadas refused to go out into the fields to work and instead, they joined the strike with some hesitation but convinced of the importance of their participation.

According to some Sakadas, they were actually educated about unionism and signed on to become members by unionized crew ship members while en route to Hawaii on the SS Maunawili. It is probable that if they did not join the strike with their Filipino peers whom together at the time made up over fifty percent of the striking workforce; this seminal event that has been termed by many historians as the "great strike" and radically changed Hawaiian society forever would NOT have occurred.

As a result, all sugar operations on all the island plantations stopped, except at one, and after seventy nine (79) days of work stoppage, a bargaining contract was ironed out that provided for higher wages and better working conditions for all sugar workers and provided a template that other labor organizations would later follow to demand and received similar benefits.

More importantly, the ILWU would become a political force and usher the rise in 1954 of the Democratic Party in, ousting the Republican Party that controlled every facet of island life for almost 100 years and subsequently converted Hawaii today as one of, if not, the most progressive State in the entire United States.

Not many Sakadas then nor their offspring today, realize the significant role the Sakadas played in the strike and the chain reactions of events that followed which eventually altered the entire political, economic, and social structure of the islands that contributed to make better the lives of NOT only Filipino families but others in the islands.

This situation of unnoticed consequence has occurred and perpetuated because, for the most part, the Sakadas by their nature were cultural practitioners of patience and humility and were not in leadership positions but collectively their hard work in the sugar and pineapple industries built the structural foundation of present day Hawaii and their participation in the labor movement resulted in higher wages and better living standard for all which cannot be denied.

The Sakada experience and story must be re-examined and evaluated in this context and it must be written and talked about more often in greater detail by all scholars, especially those of Filipino heritage, because then, and only then will future generations of Filipinos be able to truly understand where we came from and who we are as Filipino Americans in Hawaii and in the United States of America.

Today, less than fifty Sakadas are alive, most of them living on the islands of Oahu and Hawaii. On Hawaii island there are twelve and when Sakada Day was celebrated on December 18, 2016 in the old sugar town Honokaa on the Hamakua coast, three of the twelve were physically present to attend the celebration in their honor and those who have gone before them.

They share the following similarities; all are from the Ilocos region and came to Hawaii and remained to seek their fortune and a better life; they arrived in Hawaii on separate voyages on the SS Maunawili and departed from Port Salomague, Cabugao, Ilocos Sur in 1946; they settled on the Hamakua Coast of the Big Island not far from each other; all participated in a monumental sugar strike shortly after their arrival that began on September 1, 1946 and lasted for 79 days; they married and raised families with offsprings who are skilled professionals and tradesmen; all are in their nineties; and most importantly; they contributed much in silence and perseverance for the betterment of the lives of their families and others in Hawaii and the Philippines; and; all contributed to the social, economic, and political progress and the fabric that is Hawaii today

Their individual profiles are herewith provided.



**APO MARCELINO ABEDANO QUEROBIN** is ninety-five years old. He lives in Pepekeo, a small village on the Hamakua Coast of the Big Island of Hawaii located 10 miles north of Hilo. He arrived in Hawaii on SS Maunawili on January 14, 1946.

He has been a resident of the island for over seventy years and married his wife Damasa for 50 years before becoming a widower last year. They were the parents of three children, one boy and two girls and the grandparents of eight apokos.

Apo Querobin was born in Narvacan, Ilocos Sur. the son of farmers but fortunate to obtained a rare education during his youth receiving a high school diploma from Ilocos Sur Trade School in Vigan before the start of World War II.

When Japanese military forces occupied the Philippines in 1942 he joined the guerrilla resistance and fought alongside other guerrillas and regular army units. Accordingly he is recognized as a bonafide veteran and qualified for US military health and pension benefits.

He worked for Pepeekeo Sugar Company which later was consolidated with other sugar plantations in the area and renamed Hilo Coast Sugar where he worked for 37 years and retiring in 1983. Like most Filipinos working in the plantation he started as a sugar cane cutter, then as a tractor operator, cane truck driver, and finally as a utility truck driver.

While on board the SS Maunawili headed for Hawaii, he was recruited and signed on as a member of the International Longshoremen & Warehouse Union (ILWU). During his working days he was an active rank and file member of the union and served as Unit President which invited the attention US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) who questioned him about his association with the Communist Party in the early 1950s which he denied. He also served as a leader and member of many Filipino and community organizations.

Residing about two miles north of Pepeekeo is 94 years old **APO PEDRO DOMINGUEZ** of Honomu. He arrived in Hawaii on the SS Maunawili on April 11, 1946. He recalled during the voyage to Hawaii that the food on board was the best he ever had in his life and noted that plantation authorities reminded the voyagers constantly that the Japanese people in Hawaii were Americans and not the same as the invaders who occupied the Philippines during the war.



Apo Dominguez like Apo Querobin worked for the same sugar company and retired in 1984 after 38 years of service. He was born in Curimao, Ilocos Norte, the son of farmers and attained a six grade education before the start of World War II. He started working immediately after his arrival and managed to save several hundred dollars which he remitted home to his parents and siblings but when the strike was called on September 1, 1946, he joined the effort and participated in picketing and other stop work activities.

Like most other Filipinos in the plantation he started as a cane cutter and but with increased mechanization, he was trained and promoted to tractor operator, truck driver, and lastly as an operator of a heavy equipment known as a V cutter.

The V cutter was a huge bulldozer equipped at the front with a V shaped dozer and a rotating blade which when engaged and operated forward severed the cane stalks and laid it in a straight line for rapid loading onto a cane truck hauler waiting to take it to the sugar mill for processing.

Ironically, Apo Dominguez started his working career as a sugar cane cutter which is the most important work in sugar production. In the beginning he did the work with his “cane knife” as many Filipino generations did before him but in the end he did it with the most advanced equipment available and all he needed was the opportunity to learn and operate it.

Apo Dominguez lived with his first wife in Honomu for many years and they raised two boys and three girls before she passed away in 1986. He remarried and with his current wife, Feliza have one son and altogether eight grandchildren. All of their children and grandchildren have good paying professional trade occupations in Hawaii and on the US mainland



**APO BERNALDO ABELLA** is 91 year old, and was born in Santa Cruz, Ilocos Sur. He lives with his family in the village of Papaalooa, about 10 miles, north of the residence of the previous Sakada, Apo Dominguez.

Like many of his 1946 compatriots, Apo Abella came to Hawaii on a one way \$100 fare provided by the sugar growers with the promise of a “free” return trip home if he worked for three years following arrival, if not, he would need to repay the original fare. He exercised the free return trip home option in 1966 to meet and marry his wife of fifty one years, Modesta, and they are the parents of two children and three grandchildren.

Apo Abella arrived in Hawaii on the last voyage of SS Maunawili on May 21, 1946 and recalled the sad circumstance of departing from his family but was determined to seek his “fate” or “gasat” in Ilocano in order to “seek a better life” after the hardships he had experienced especially during the War.

What he remembers most about his arrival was the heavy and continuous rain that fell almost every day for several months and the endless acres of green fields of sugar cane from the ocean to the mountain unlike the smaller rice and vegetables acreages that his family tended back home.

Later on for the first time in his life he, saw from his vantage point in the fields, a white substance called “snow” which was not in his vocabulary that blanketed the twin peaks of Mauna (mountain) Kea (white) and Mauna Loa (long) of Hawaii island. Little did he know then that below the shadows of these mountains that he would make Hawaii island his home and where he would plant his roots and raise a family.

He was first assigned to Papaikou Sugar Co located north and only few miles from Hilo. He started as a cane cutter then as a cane flume feeder that required him to carry heavy bundles of sugar cane onto a water flume that floated the cane stalk to the sugar mill for processing .

He weighed only around 115 lbs and his foreman who was Filipino took pity and reassigned him to be a flume watchman with the responsibility of untangling sugar cane that prevented water movement in the flume. Later he transferred to the mill as a pan man where he was responsible for monitoring the flow of cane juice from one site to another.

After several months, he transferred to a similar position with Laupahoehoe Sugar Co situated twenty north of Papaikou. He served as crew chief in the mill for twenty years in charge of several workers and to make sure that all equipment operated properly and the production of molasses and brown sugar met production standards.

When Laupahoehoe Sugar Co. was consolidated with other plantations in the area to become Hamakua Sugar Company headquartered north in Honokaa, 15miles away; he transferred from factory work and became a utility service truck driver responsible for servicing all types of machinery in the field. He retired at age 69 years old in 1990 with forty two years of service.

He is most proud of his long service in the sugar industry and most of all for having provided a good life for himself and his family and unknowingly other Hawaii residents as well. Like many of his compatriots who came and remained on the islands to make it home, there is no “regret” as the dream for good “gasat” has been fulfilled and there a silent optimism that it will continue in the subsequent generations to come.

The legacy of the Sakadas is the hard work they provided in the fields of Hawaii and their activism for worker benefits and rights and it is our duty in Hawaii and in the homeland in the Philippines to remember and to be forever grateful for these pioneers who were the first to venture abroad to seek a better life for themselves and their families and succeeded. They made a DIFFERENCE! (END).

***Romel Dela Cruz is the son, grandson, and nephew of six uncles all of them, Sakadas. He was born in Laoag City, Ilocos Norte and migrated in 1954 with his mother to reunite with his 1946 Sakada father on the Island of Hawaii where he resides with his wife Jodean of 45 years. They are the parents of 2 adult sons and the grandparents of 4 grandchildren. He attended public schools in Hawaii and***

***graduated with a masters degree in Public Health from the University of Hawaii and retired in 2007 after 32 years as a healthcare and hospital administrator. His passion is to write and talk about the Filipino experience in Hawaii.***