Large trunks discovered in a basement offer a window into the lives and struggles of early Filipino migrants

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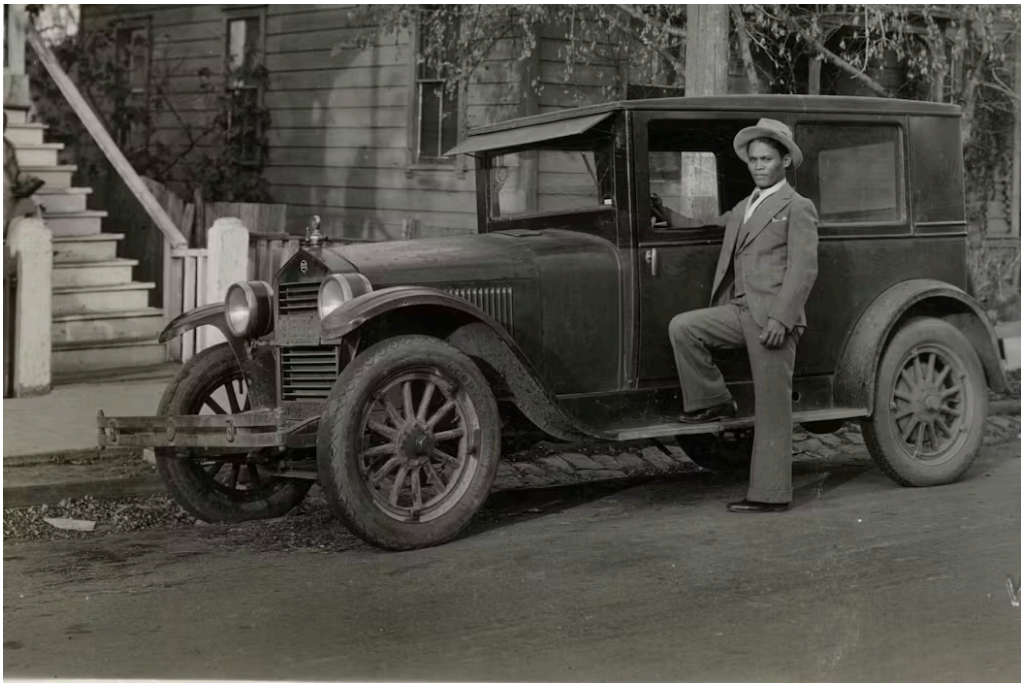

A Filipino man poses next to a Ford Model A in the 1930s.

Filipino Agricultural Workers Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History

In 2005, Antonio Somera, a Filipino American member of the Legionarios del Trabajo, a Masonic fraternal order, stumbled across a trove of mysterious-looking containers while he was cleaning out the basement of the Daguhoy Lodge in Stockton, California.

The containers, which had been abandoned for decades, included more than a dozen steamer trunks – large luggage chests designed for long-distance travel – and a handful of suitcases dating to the 1910s.

They belonged to former Legionarios del Trabajo members who at some point lived in the lodge but had passed away. Fraternal brothers packed their personal belongings to memorialize the deceased and hoped that surviving family members would later reclaim the objects.

These unusual time capsules and their contents tell a largely forgotten history of the men and women who had left the Philippines in the 1910s to work in Hawaii's sugar industry and later settled in California's San Joaquin Valley. Affectionately dubbed "Little Manila," south Stockton became an important hub for one of the largest communities of Filipinos outside the Philippines.

Along with my curatorial assistant, Ethan Johanson, we studied the fascinating objects and photographs found in the trunks to tell the story of this largely forgotten cohort of migrants.

Here are five objects that capture the breadth and depth of life and work in California, Hawaii and other states for Filipino migrants. They're among those featured in an exhibition created by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center on display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Titled, "How Can You Forget Me: Filipino American Stories," the exhibition explores the making of the Filipino American community in Stockton between the 1910s and 1970s.

1. The steamer trunk

A wardrobe trunk that held the personal belongings of Anastacio Atig Omandam, who left the Philippines in 1916 to work in Hawaii and later settled in Stockton, Calif., where he died in 1966.

National Museum of American History

This steamer trunk formerly belonged to Anastacio Atig Omandam, a worker who arrived in Honolulu from the Philippine province Negros Oriental in January 1916.

In his 20s, Omandam embarked on a two- to three-week voyage across the Pacific Ocean, leaving his rural and impoverished hometown to earn money to send home.

Omandam was part of a group of mostly young, single men who were recruited by sugar plantation companies as early as 1906 to work in Hawaii's booming sugar industry. Between 1906 and 1935, thousands of men – and later women – left their hometowns in the Ilocos and Visayas regions of the Philippines for Hawaii, toiling on plantations alongside other immigrant workers.

After the United States defeated Spain in the 1898 Spanish-American War, the Philippines was under U.S. colonial rule until 1935.

Filipinos living under American rule and in U.S. territories were designated as U.S. nationals, an ambiguous legal status. It allowed Filipinos to migrate relatively freely within U.S. territories, but they lacked constitutional protections and privileges such as citizenship and voting rights.

Omandam's steamer trunk is emblematic of the trunks discovered by Somera in 2005. Omandam likely bought the trunk secondhand in the Philippines or Hawaii. While the origins of the trunk remain a mystery, it traveled with Omandam from job to job, reflecting the life of a migrant worker continually on the move. Many of these trunks – Omandam's included – contained handwritten correspondence written in beautiful cursive, photographs, postcards, work tools, garments and pay stubs.

They were, in essence, time capsules of each of these men's lives.

2. An asparagus knife

An asparagus knife appears above various tools, all of which were found inside the trunks.

National Museum of American History

The large, unusual-looking metal instrument found in one trunk is a knife that farmworkers used to harvest asparagus.

During the harvesting season, typically between February and June, workers wielded this knife, using the sharp edge of the forked blade to pierce approximately 6 inches (15 centimeters) below the soil to cut the root of the asparagus.

Harvesting asparagus demanded dexterity and speed. Workers needed to constantly bend over to cut and collect the produce as they moved up and down the rows. This repetitive and backbreaking motion earned Filipino farmworkers the derogatory label “stoop labor.”

After a series of restrictive immigration laws barred Chinese, Japanese and other immigrant groups between the 1870s and 1920s, growers and agribusiness turned to hiring Filipinos and Mexicans to harvest seasonal crops such as lettuce, grapes and asparagus, among others.

When the harvesting season was over, Filipino farmworkers migrated to other West Coast states to harvest apples, hops and grapes. Others went to Alaska to can salmon.

The asparagus knife was found among the containers in the basement, alongside other grafting and pruning knives. These tools – still carrying the soil from which they were tilled – represent the work of the immigrant farmworkers of all backgrounds who helped build California's agriculture industry, which continues to feed the nation today.

3. Three-piece suits

Three-piece suits were found in nearly all the steamer trunks, along with Stetson hats, bow ties and other fashionable accessories from the 1920s and '30s.

Despite earning meager wages, most Filipino farmworkers saved their hard-earned money to purchase at least one tailored three-piece suit. Men donned these stylish garments to attend Sunday Mass, dinners and taxi-dance halls – where they could pay a small fee to dance with a professional dancer – or merely to strut their stuff down the streets of Stockton's Little Manila.

This tailored three-piece suit with matching Stetson hat was worn by Anastacio Omandam.

National Museum of American History

Because Americans often looked down upon agricultural workers as uncultured and illiterate – "little brown monkeys" was a common slur – Filipinos resisted these negative characterizations by presenting themselves like the Hollywood movie stars they saw at the cinema. They understood the power of self-presentation: By embracing popular American styles, they sought to command respect and dignity.

They also wore these suits to pose for fancy photographs that were sent back home to the Philippines as a way to display affluence and social mobility – and to entice their compatriots to join them in the U.S.

Not everyone was enchanted. Some white Americans viewed these slick, handsomely dressed Filipino men as a sexual threat that could "steal" their women.

4. A pageant dress

This sequined dress belonged to Barbara Nambatac, a longtime resident of Livingston, California, who grew up among the "manongs," a kinship title meaning older brother often used when referring to this early generation of Filipino migrants.

Her Filipino father was a cook who served food to Filipino and Mexican field hands on farms throughout California's Central Valley, where he later met Nambatac's Mexican mother.

In the 19th century and into the 20th century, California's anti-miscegenation laws prohibited whites from marrying outside their race. At the same time, the shared experiences of Mexican and Filipino farmworkers often led to relationships between members of the two migrant groups.

When Barbara was 21, Nambatac's father, who was a member of the Legionarios del Trabajo in Stockton, saved his modest salary to buy the dress from the Philippines and registered her in a beauty pageant that helped raise funds for the lodge. She ultimately took first place.

Barbara Nambatac wore this white dress when she was crowned Queen of Little Manila in a 1971 beauty pageant.

Photo by Phillip R. Lee

In Stockton's Little Manila, pageants reinforced the importance of women in the community. Since women were discouraged from migrating, there was a gender imbalance in Filipino American communities that persisted for decades.

Filipinas who were able to migrate to the United States were important pillars in Stockton's Filipino American community and assumed multiple roles. Women labored tirelessly alongside men in the fields, performed domestic work in households, advised young men to save money and go to school, and built and maintained networks that sustained local communities and transpacific ties back home in the Philippines.

Although the gender disparity was stark in Little Manila before the 1960s, the presence of women and girls ensured the survival of Filipino American families.

5. A pillowcase

One of three pillowcases found in the steamer trunks. These were mementos that Filipino migrants kept to remember their loved ones back in the Philippines.

National Museum of American History

This pillowcase was one of three found in Anastacio Omandam's steamer trunk.

It's embroidered with floral patterns and a poignant message – "How Can You Forget Me" – which inspired the exhibition's title. The pillowcases, along with letters and photographs, evoke the sentimental messages that connected friends, families and lovers separated by a vast ocean.

In the case of Omandam, a loved one from the Philippines likely sent him the pillowcase. The lack of punctuation is interesting: It serves as neither a question nor a declaration, but nonetheless urges Omandam to never let go of his memories of home.

In the same way, I hope the exhibition will implore visitors to never forget this generation of men and women who paved a path for other Filipino immigrants. More than 4.4 million Americans identify as having Filipino ancestry, according to the 2020 U.S. census.

These objects reflect the stories of ordinary people who were resourceful, creative, resilient and filled with hope in the face of discrimination, racism and legal exclusion.

The odds were constantly stacked against them. And yet they persevered – each strike into the soil, each coin saved to save up for a new suit, each lodge meeting and each beauty pageant taking them one step closer to forging a place for themselves in the American story.

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