

Discovering the Past

magdalena

A drive through an idyllic countryside uncovers the dilapidated birthplace of Lolo Jim in a land that time forgot.

BY BIBOT SANTAYANA

↑ To the Laico Generations N and O, descendants of Generation L (Lolo Jim and Lola Luz) and M (the Maraming Anak of Generation L): Who among you know where Magdalena, Laguna is? You're probably asking yourselves, "Why do we need to know where Magdalena, Laguna is?"

Magdalena is the town where Lolo Jim was born. Very few among you have been to Magdalena, so one day last April, Tita Bingbing, Tita PeeWee and I hied off to Magdalena with some of the N's and O's for a discovery tour. In our 3-vehicle convoy were Jimboy, Maryann and Justin, Bambi, Rolly and Nico and Patrice, Tita Bingbing, Bubbles, Tita PeeWee, Jeremy, Carlo, and myself. We took the South Super Highway and after a brief visit with Tia Ester and Tio Cesar Cayamanda in San Pablo (Tia Ester is the only surviving sibling of Lolo Jim), we were in Magdalena. Of course it wasn't without a few missed junctions and backtracking, but we enjoyed it anyway because we had not been in the province for some time. It was refreshing to see rice fields again and little brooks and lots of greenery.

Magdalena is about an hour away from Makati. From the South Super Highway one exits in Calamba, and continues towards Sta. Cruz (the capital of Laguna), passing through Los Baños, Bay, Victoria and Pila. Just before reaching Pagsanjan is a sign that points you towards Magdalena.

MAGDALENA IS A SMALL, QUIET TOWN, BUT it is significant for us because it is the birthplace of Lolo Jim. When Lolo Jim was a young eligible gentleman, his father, Ananias Laico was the congressman for the province of Laguna. Before he was elected congressman, people then said, "A congressman from Magdalena? One is yet to be born." But Lolo Ananias beat the incumbent congressman and became the first (and probably the only)



Scenes from rustic Magdalena. **TOP:** The historic Laico ancestral home. **MIDDLE:** (from left to right) Tita PeeWee, Jeremy, Tita Bingbing, Carlo, and Bubbles. **BOTTOM:** "For Sale" sign hangs at the front gate.

congressman from Magdalena.

The town's main product is coconuts. There are no industries in Magdalena, so many young people have gone on to other countries to try their luck. The new houses there are built from the sweat of overseas workers. The town has not progressed much, but this has helped to preserve its idyllic, rural atmosphere. It is a

typical town founded during the Spanish times, with the church at the center.

The church of Magdalena is a noble stone edifice on an elevated site. It stands guardian over the community and from its site one gets a good view of the town hall, the town plaza, the elementary school, and the houses both old and new. The church was built during the Spanish times and it has been used in many Fernando Poe Jr. movies. Recently, it was also used in a church scene of the award-winning movie *Rizal*.

The public elementary school in Magdalena is the Ananias Laico Memorial Elementary School, named after Lolo Ananias. The school was built during Lolo Jim's time. It was there that Lolo and his brothers and sisters went for Grades 1 to 6. The flagpole base has the name of Lolo's sister, Beatriz, and the year when she was crowned as the school queen.

WE GOT TO MAGDALENA AT about 1:00 p.m. Our first stop was Ate Pacita's house. Ate Pacita is the eldest daughter of Lolo Jim's first cousin, Dolores Laico Pronove. Ate Pacita has done a lot to help the people of Magdalena through the Dolores Laico Pronove Foundation. Ate Pacita had been waiting, but we still had to take our lunch. So after cursory greetings and introductions, we drove to Pagsanjan Rapids Hotel to eat.

When we got back to Magdalena, Ate Pacita brought us to the Ananias Laico Memorial Elementary School, or ALMES for short. We met the principal and some of the teachers, who were all very hospitable. They gave us a tour of the school, which was clean and orderly. They were proud to show us the assembly hall with the gracefully draped pink curtains in the stage and in the windows which they themselves sewed and for which they had to solicit donations. Some portions of the floor are beginning to give way, so the teachers gather whatever resources they can to fix the floors. After a hearty *merienda* which the teachers prepared, Jimboy and Bingbing presented a computer and used books that they were donating to the school. Hopefully, we can enjoin our Laico cousins to help ALMES to perpetuate the memory of Lolo Ananias. We took a few photos of the school and walked to the town library.

The town library is a one room affair about 6 meters square, with a bare concrete floor and ceilingless roof. The librarian says that in the afternoon it gets unbearably hot. Nevertheless, the library is getting quite popular with the students even from the next town, Sta. Cruz, who come to do their research there.

OUR LAST STOP WAS THE HOUSE OF LOLO JIM. The Laico house is very visible even from a few hundred meters away. It is the only surviving Spanish era house in Magdalena. It is the typical *Bahay-na-Bato*. The house stands on thick concrete foundations and walls. The ground floor was used as a storage area for rice as well as a garage for their coach or car. The living area was in the second floor. The entrance of the house was on the right side. Near the entrance was an Italian style water fountain which is still intact. The staircase was about 6 ft. wide, the steps made of thick wooden planks. The living room and dining room were so spacious. The house was very well-ventilated. The living room had windows on three sides, with sliding louvers to keep the afternoon sun out. The floors were made of wide planks of hardwood. The kitchen is bigger than some restaurants' kitchens.

Our family's ancestral home is now in a sad state of disrepair. Many years back, Lola would tell us about how beautiful the house was. Lola Chayong, Lolo Jim's mother, was a very good homemaker. The house was elegantly furnished. It had exquisite furniture and fixtures and the details of the interiors were simply marvelous. Even Ate Pacita has very fond memories of the grand parties and fiestas that took place in it.

Soon the house will be torn down. It will be a sad day for those who remember what Lolo's house was like, but restoration is a very expensive undertaking. We were fortunate to have seen it one last time and walked around the rooms imagining the luxurious lifestyle our forebears lived.

“Soon the house will be torn down. It will be a sad day for those who remember what Lolo's house was like, but restoration is a very expensive undertaking...”



Generations “N” and “O” at Ananias Laico Memorial Elementary School.