

Radical Violence in the Fields: Anti-Filipino Riot in Watsonville

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Racial violence and racial discrimination are major issues that affect the entire Filipino community. Among the three waves of Filipino who immigrated to the United States, it was the first wave of Filipinos who experienced the most blatant form of racism.¹ This first wave was also marginalized by the mainstream society, maintaining the most backbreaking jobs such as farm work, domestic service jobs, cannery jobs, and stewards on ships. The subsequent waves of Filipinos who came to the shores of the U.S. also faced racism and racial discrimination, but not to the extent and depth of the first wave. The particularly virulent racial violence against Filipinos in the late 1920s and 1930s had to do with the social and political climate of the times.

The characteristics of this first wave provided fuel for tensions that emerged. Agribusiness recruited a large mass of Filipino workers for cheap transient labor. This constituted largely a bachelor community with an average age of 21 years (9 out of 10 Filipinos who immigrated were males). Immigration figures jumped from 5,603 in 1920 to 45,203 in 1930 (Continental U.S.).² By 1930, Filipinos comprised 42 percent of all non-European agricultural labor in California.³ When the Great Depression hit the nation, Filipinos became targets for the frustration of white Americans who perceived them as a threat to their economic survival.

Moreover, since they were considered Orientals, the anti-Oriental labor leaders and politicians tried to apply the same exclusion policies as they did to the Chinese and Japanese immigrant communities. The first exclusion bills sponsored by Congressman Richard Welch and Senator Hiram Johnson failed because, unlike China and Japan, the Philippines was an American protectorate since the Spanish-American War of 1898.⁴ The early Filipinos were not aliens, so the exclusion laws could not apply to them; they were American nationals. This proved to be a political liability in the end for the Filipinos, since they could not apply to become naturalized American citizens; and yet, ideologically, the Filipinos were already assimilated into the system of American values.

¹ There were three waves of Filipino immigration: The first wave came in the 1920's and 1930's, the second wave after WWII, and the third wave began in the late 60's and continues today.

² Bruno Lasker, *Filipino Immigration*, (Chicago: Arno Press, 1971), 22,23.

³ Howard A. De Witt, *Anti-Filipino Movements in California: A History. Bibliography and Study Guide*, (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1976), 33.

⁴ James Earl Wood Papers, Bancroft Library, File 1.

The anti-Filipino riot in Watsonville, California was the most explosive vigilante incident in Filipino-American history. A historiographical study of this riot has all the complicated elements of a racial conflict: multiple factors involving economic, social, and political dynamics are interwoven in the conflict.

While this event was clearly the most widely publicized, it was not isolated. By 1928 anti-Filipino violence occurred all along the West Coast - from Washington to Oregon to California farming towns, such as Stockton and Watsonville. The first anti-Filipino riot occurred in Exeter, a small farming community in the San Joaquin Valley of California. Bitterness had developed over the use of Filipino labor to harvest Kadota figs and Emperor grapes. However, the riot occurred in a social setting where young Filipinos dated local girls. The mob of three hundred men burned the labor camp where Filipinos were housed. Luckily, none were in the camp at the time.

Similar to the Exeter riot, the racial violence in Watsonville embodied a clear social statement by the local white community - the non-assimilability of the Filipino.

The frictions began in Watsonville on January 10, 1930 when Judge D. W. Rohrbach, a Justice of the Peace Judge of Watsonville, issued a resolution at a Northern California Monterey Chamber of Commerce meeting, which was subsequently printed in the local newspapers, condemning the Filipino as an economic and social menace to American society. Racist remarks, such as Filipinos were “but 10 years removed from a bolo and a breechcloth,” infuriated the Filipino community. His comments included statements such as:

For a wage that a white man cannot exist on, the Filipinos will take the job and, through the clannish, low standard mode of housing and feeding, practiced among them, will soon be well clothed, and strutting about like a peacock and endeavoring to attract the eyes of the young American and Mexican girls. Fifteen Filipinos will live in a room or two, sleeping on the floor and contenting themselves with squatting on the floors and eating fish and rice. The same group will form a club and buy a partnership in a classy automobile and, like Solomon in all his glory, will roll along the highways. Marriages among white and Filipinos soon will be common, and if the present state of affairs continues there will be 40,000 half-breeds in the State of California before 10 years have passed. We do not advocate violence but we do feel that the United States should give the Filipinos their liberty and then send those unwelcome inhabitants from our shores that the whites who have inherited this country for themselves and their offspring,

*might live.*⁵

Meanwhile, on January 11, a taxi-dance hall with white dance girls opened for Filipinos in Palm Beach, only a few miles west of Watsonville. The existence of the taxi-dance hall, where white girls were seen dancing with Filipinos, upset the local white community's sense of propriety.⁶ A white eyewitness, interviewed 10 days later by the sociologist E. Bogardus, expressed this outrage: "Taxi dance halls where white girls dance with Orientals may be all right in San Francisco or Los Angeles but not in our community. We are a small city and have had nothing of the kind before. We won't stand for anything of the kind."⁷

Several days later, the Filipino community responded by printing the Torch, a four page rebuttal of Judge Rorhbach's statements which essentially defended the humanity of Filipinos:

*Filipinos can never be treated as slaves. If Rohrbach wants to see the Filipinos out of the City, "jailed" in the field and camp, not "mixing" with white people, he will have to go to the grave without seeing it. From primary school in the Islands we begin to get familiar with Lincoln. . . . We Filipinos were brought up under the Christian principle that God created men equal, and so we do not believe in "racial superiority." . . . We feel that as human beings we have the same inalienable rights in this country to take those who love us as our legitimate wife.*⁸

On January 18, on the eve of the riots, the Evening Pajaronian of Watsonville heightened the racist climate and printed an article headlined, "State Organization Will Fight Filipino Influx Into County," about Congressman Welch's reintroduction of federal legislation to exclude Filipino farm labor.

From January 19 through January 23, there were five days of racial hostilities in which the local white community attacked Filipinos. On January 19, they picketed the taxi-dance hall. That same day, 300 Filipinos met at Palm Beach to oppose Judge Rorhbach's statements and to condemn local businessmen and local politicians for inciting anti-Filipino sentiment. On January 20-22, 200 armed local whites searched the streets and raided the dance hall. On January 23, 500 armed local whites went to the farms and killed one Filipino, Fermin Tovera, and

⁵ Evening Pajaronian, January 11, 1930; Wood Papers, Folder 4.

⁶ Taxi-dance halls were a form of entertainment for Asian bachelors; Filipino males paid ten cents a minute to dance with hired dancers. It was the first opportunity for social contacts with young American women. But Californians reacted with moral outrage against the thought of the races mixing.

⁷ Emory S. Bogardus, "Anti-filipino Race Riots," a Report to the Ingram Institute of Social Science of San Diego (May 15, 1930, 3-29).

⁸ The Torch, January 1930; Wood Papers, Folder 4

injured 50 others. After five days of rioting, the violence ended when the local American Legion branch and a group of local citizens calmed down the white mob. Eventually, eight rioters were caught but only four were tried; one was given a maximum sentence of one month in jail, and the others were released on probation. The murderer was never caught despite the fact that there were concrete leads and a confession by the assailant.⁹

Immediately after the incidents, contemporary newspapers, such as the Watsonville Evening Pajaronian, reported the causes: the statements by Judge Rorhbach and the rebuttal by the Filipino press, focusing on the right of Filipinos to date local women, and the opening of the taxi- dance hall.¹⁰ Other newspapers, such as the San Jose Mercury-Herald, reported the high crime rate of Filipinos as the cause; in another article the San Jose Herald reported, “Reds incited race outbreaks.”¹¹ This was due to a petition circulated by the Young Communist League charging the complicity of local government and authorities in the violence.

The Filipino community’s responses were a combination of caution and indignity towards the American public. In Los Angeles, the Filipino Citizens League urged peace and tranquility among their fellow countrymen. Similarly, the San Jose Filipino Community urged calm attitudes. In the Philippines and in Los Angeles, the city with the largest concentration of Filipinos in the continental U.S., simultaneous demonstrations were held proclaiming the indignity of Fermin Tovera’s death. The Filipino press, such newspapers as Ang Bantay and the Torch, took a more militant stand, exposing the duplicity of the local political establishment and law enforcement agencies.¹² A Filipino eyewitness in Watsonville had this to say:

*We do not resent this movement in so far as it favors the local man, regardless of his color he deserves primary consideration. But there is one thing that we do resent: we do not want to be branded as a social menace and the scum of the earth. Furthermore, we are under the American flag, and deserve some consideration. . . We are proud of the country that has fostered us, but we do not deserve this treatment. Americans do not return our respect. We ought to be allowed to at least earn our bread and butter.*¹³

Finally, the Filipino Commissioners of the Philippines in Washington, D.C.

⁹ San Francisco Chronicle, Jan 24, 1930; Wood Papers, Folder 2.

¹⁰ Evening Pajaroman, Jan 23, 1930.

¹¹ San Jose Mercury Herald, Jan 25, 1930.

¹² DeWitt, Anti-filipino Movements in California, 33; Wood Papers, Folder 4.

¹³ Luis Agudo, Interview by James Earl Wood, February 1930, handwritten notes, James Earl Wood Papers, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

requested a federal investigation of the incident. Both Commissioners Guevera and Osias confirmed to reporters that the Filipino Community League of Salinas had provided evidence to prove the presence of police involvement.¹⁴

Unwittingly, the Filipino community was a victim of the anti-Oriental political and social climate previously created by the anti-Oriental movement, predominantly composed of organized labor which opposed Asian immigration as a threat to white American labor. The switch from the Japanese to the Filipinos as targets was relatively easy since the anti-Oriental movement and organized labor were vocal and influential in California politics. Paul Sharrenberg, Secretary Treasurer of the California State Federation of Labor, was one of the chief proponents of Filipino exclusion. Organized labor and nativist groups, such as the American Legion, the Commonwealth Club, and the Native Sons of the Golden West, formed the social and political base for politicians like Congressmen Welch and Senator Johnson. Many of these politicians opportunistically became supporters of Philippine independence so that Filipinos could be excluded as other oriental aliens.

They used the sentiments of the Filipino community for Philippine independence as a pretext for exclusion of Filipinos. The Three Stars, a Filipino newspaper of Stockton, stated after the riot in Watsonville:

The situation so far as we could discern, presents three vital considerations as its underlying causes, namely: racial, social, and economic factors. . . . These can all be adjusted through tolerance - if tolerance is only given an opportunity to assert itself; but it is unfortunate that a small number about Watsonville wanted to settle it by themselves without any regard to the great moral forces of the country which are working day and night to solve this problem.

In view of the fact that it would be a waste of time and life to compromise on these vital principles, let us Filipinos have our independence immediately and complete, and in this way solve the whole problem for all time.¹⁵

The early Filipino immigrant was also a pawn of the agribusiness industry which sought to use cheap labor. In particular, the economic and social base of Watsonville, previously the center for apple and berry production, changed overnight because of the development of the lettuce industry. By 1930, Watsonville produced 25 percent of all lettuce shipped outside of California. The power of local civic and business leaders was replaced by big business.

Finally, the social tensions between young Filipinos and white males

¹⁴ DeWitt, Anti-Filipino Movements in California

¹⁵ The Three Stars, February 5, 1930; Wood Papers, Folder 4.

incensed the local community. According to the Stockton Record, “the insistence of Filipinos that they be treated as equals by white girls has been the chief cause of friction between the races. It is predicted the racial tensions would continue.”¹⁶ Despite the discriminatory legislation passed in California (1901) forbidding whites from marrying Negroes, Mongolians (i.e. Asians), and mulattos, Filipinos continued to date Mexicans and white girls. Ironically, while the taxi-dance business provided a necessary release for the Filipino bachelor, it was condemned as a moral vice. To complicate matters further, the Americanization of the Filipino after the colonization of the Philippines inculcated the American ideals of liberty and freedom. The difference between the American ideal and the American reality hit hard upon the sensibility of the average Filipino. Resolutions passed unanimously in a mass meeting of Filipinos in Los Angeles revealed this sentiment:

*Whereas, without cause, as he can ascertain, violent mobs have injured and murdered young Filipino boys who were not violating the laws of the State of California, but only living in accordance with those laws;.. Be it resolved that we, the Filipinos residing in the City of Los Angeles aforesaid, appeal to the citizenry of the City of Los Angeles and the State of California to keep good faith with the people of our race who, in reliance upon the promises of the national government have come to the mainland of America and who are carrying on peaceful pursuits in the State of California and are obeying its laws, to see that the fair name of the United States Government and its promises will not be sullied.*¹⁷

The results of the anti-Filipino incidents left an indelible mark on the first wave of the Filipino community. They left Watsonville for surrounding areas, such as Salinas, where there were larger numbers of Filipinos. Many were radicalized as labor organizers and some even joined the Young Communist League.

Finally, after a culmination of anti-exclusion bills, President Roosevelt signed a Repatriation Act on July 11, 1935 which was essentially a deportation bill. The act provided Filipinos who desired to return to the Philippines with transportation expenses paid (the provisions of the bill were not applicable to Hawaii where a large labor force of Filipinos was needed); however, those who returned could never re-enter the U.S. Eventually, 2,190 returned.

In summary, racial violence is often complex, interwoven with economic, social, and/or political causal factors. The social frictions were a major factor in the tensions producing the Watsonville riot. In *American Violence*, Richard Hofstadter

¹⁶ Stockton Record, October 5, 1929.

¹⁷ The Three Stars, February 5, 1930; Wood Papers, Folder 4.

stated that,

Most American violence has been initiated with a conservative bias.... A high proportion of our violent actions has come from the top dogs or the middle dogs. Violence has been unleashed against abolitionists, Catholics, radicals, workers and labor organizers, Negroes, Orientals, and other minorities to protect the American, the Southern, the white Protestant, or simply the established middle-class way of life and morals. Vigilante groups were rarely led by rowdies or thugs - they are drawn from the top levels of local society, sometimes prominent merchants and able young men on the make and their following come largely from the solid middle class.¹⁸

In the case of Watsonville, the local community leadership initiated the wave of violence: Judge Rorhbach was a member of the local anti-Filipino lobby and a member of the Monterey Chamber of Commerce; Congressman Welch was the representative for the San Jose/Watsonville area; the rioters were members of the stable white community.

The 'cheap labor' conflict was also a major factor. But according to Alexander Saxton, in *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California*, this conflict coincided with and reinforced older patterns of thought and behavior relative to blacks, and especially to black slavery. The ideological pattern of racial superiority and the pattern of organized violence was already set within the minds of the average Californian.

The irony of it all is that while white middle class morality, reserved for whites only, was being affronted by the Filipino, early Filipino immigrants thought they were included in that sense of morality and tried very hard to copy it.

¹⁸ Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, *American Violence: A Documentary History*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 11.