



Watsonville is in the Heart

A Partnership with the Tobera Project to Preserve Filipino History in Pajaro Valley, CA

UC SANTA CRUZ | Campus + Community



Mamerto "Max" Sulay in the Crosetti Ranch lettuce fields where he worked as a labor contractor.

"Mamerto "Max" Sulay in the Crosetti Fields(3)," date unknown, photograph, 3.5 x 4.25 inches, Collection of Juanita Sulay Wilson

Aladina Cawaling standing in a field of flowers near her home on Calabastas Road.

"Aladina Cawaling Standing Around Flowers," c. 1960s, photograph, 3.5 x 3.5 inches, Collection of Loren Cawaling

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An Archive to Honor the Manong

Watsonville is in the Heart (WIITH) is an initiative organized by Assistant Professor of History Kathleen Gutierrez and Associate Professor of Sociology Steve McKay in collaboration with Roy Recio, founder of the Tobera Project aiming to preserve and uplift the history and heritage of Filipino families in Watsonville and the Pajaro Valley. In April 2022, the initiative launched a digital archive, directed by History graduate student Meleia Simon-Reynolds and HAVC graduate student Christina Ayson Plank documenting the stories of the “manong” generation (Ilokano/Tagalog for “older brother”) of Filipino migrant farmworkers who first settled in the Pajaro Valley in the early to mid-twentieth century. The archive features oral histories collected from manong descendants, family photographs, heirlooms, letters, and newspaper clippings that capture the rich history of Filipino life in Watsonville and the Pajaro Valley.

A third-generation Filipino American, Recio is the grandson of the manong generation. When his parents passed away, he began to fear that the stories of the first immigrants of Filipino heritage on the Central Coast would be forgotten and founded the Tobera Project to preserve and tell those stories. That such stories are often excluded from official accounts of the area’s history made the project even more urgent for Recio, who believes it is his generation’s responsibility to honor the resilience of the elders who built a community amidst prejudice and discrimination. In this spirit, Recio named the project after Fermin Tobera, a Filipino American who was murdered during the Watsonville Race Riots of 1930, when a white mob terrorized the local Filipino community for five days. Though considered a seminal event in Asian American history, much of the existing scholarship on the riots relies on newspaper reports that exclude Filipino perspectives. The Tobera Project changes that by uplifting the memories and accounts of those who experienced the riots.

Creating Collaboration

To kick off the Tobera Project, Recio mounted an exhibition at the Watsonville Public Library featuring family photographs, documents, and heirlooms from the local Filipino community. Following a visit to the exhibition in early 2020, Steven McKay, Campus + Community Fellow and Associate Professor of Sociology at UC Santa Cruz, connected with Recio and discussed how the university could help create and host a digital archive accessible to the local community, researchers, and the general public. Recio would later meet Assistant Professor of History Kathleen Gutierrez, who joined the UCSC in 2020 with an interest in working with the Watsonville Filipino community, having herself grown up in a Filipino community in Los Angeles. A partnership with the university was formed in April 2020, with McKay and Gutierrez as co-investigators. They were joined by two graduate students, Christina Ayson Plank and Meleia Simon-Reynolds, forming a core team of five that have been working to realize Recio’s vision ever since.

Future Directions

Plank and Simon-Reynolds designed, compiled, and cataloged the digital archive, supported by a team of undergraduate students. Two of the undergraduates, Katrina Mitsuko Pagaduan and Markus Faye Portacio, had the opportunity to curate their own digital exhibits, available for view on the WIITH website. The oral histories will eventually be archived in the special collections at the McHenry Library, but this is only the tip of the iceberg. A graduate student in the History of Art and Visual Culture department, Plank is planning an exhibition due to open at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History in April 2024. The goal of the exhibition is to demonstrate how deep engagement with the WIITH archive can lead to powerful research and cultural work. Titled “Sowing Seeds: Filipino American Stories from the Pajaro Valley,” the exhibition will include many artifacts documented on the digital archive, oral histories, and new works created by contemporary artists from the Bay Area who Plank has invited to intervene in the archive and engage with the manong histories of the area.

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Also on the horizon is the creation of a K-12 ethnic studies curriculum related to the project. Recio and the local Filipino community highlight the importance not only of preserving their stories and histories, but also of teaching them in schools across the Pajaro Valley, Watsonville and Santa Cruz County. A PhD candidate in the History Department, Simon-Reynolds has been leading these efforts. She is part of a monthly “Community Collaborative” working group hosted by the Pajaro Valley Unified School District, which is working to craft an ethnic studies curriculum. They hope to dedicate the rest of the year to developing resources that will help teachers in the Pajaro Valley integrate these community histories into their classes.

Telling Forgotten Stories

To date, the team has conducted 30 oral histories with the Filipino community in Watsonville and have an additional 30 lined up, with more and more community members expressing interest in participating in the project. The team is also now reviewing the oral histories collected so far, and thinking further about how some of the themes that have emerged in these stories might add to and disrupt existing scholarship on the manong. At the forefront of these efforts is uncovering the dynamic lifeways of Filipino Americans in the Pajaro Valley. But that’s not all. These rich and nuanced oral histories challenge the image of the manong generation as a “bachelor society,” offering insight into how these pioneers created a sense of family and community beyond traditional conceptions of what that entails. For example, the manong established fraternal organizations, which often included women’s auxiliary contingents made up of their white and Mexican spouses. Together, they performed important roles in representing the community. These histories demand a more capacious understanding of Filipino identity in Watsonville and open up fascinating questions about the construction of race and ethnicity, particularly what it means to be mixed-race. While the launch of the digital archive is a huge achievement for the Watsonville is in the Heart team, it is also just a beginning, with much more to come.

For Further Reading

To learn more about Watsonville is in the Heart, visit their project page [here](#).

Goodman, Rachel. “New Archive Celebrates Filipino Heritage.” *KSQD Community Radio*, April 8, 2022. Available at: <https://ksqd.org/new-archive-celebrates-filipino-heritage/>

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Gelderloos, Keith and Sofia Ruster. “Watsonville is in the Heart: Honoring the Manong Generation in California’s Central Coast.” *City on a Hill Press*, April 14, 2022. Available at: <https://www.cityonahillpress.com/2022/04/14/watsonville-is-in-the-heart-honoring-the-manong-generation-in-californias-central-coast/>

Questions? Contact us.

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