

FILIPINAS! Voices from Daughters and Descendants of Hawaii's Plantation Era

Patricia Brown

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This is an unprecedented look at the life of the early Filipino community in Hawaii in astonishing detail.

Started by fifteen men recruited to work on sugar plantations in 1906, the Filipino community is now the second largest ethnic population in Hawaii. *FILIPINAS! Voices from Daughters and Descendants of Hawaii's Plantation Era* is the deeply personal and celebratory history of the first groups of women to arrive from the Philippines to work the fields. Patricia Brown has gathered a fascinating collection of stories from living relatives and put them within the context of the economic and social realities of their time.

The book draws from the historical record and the written memories of children of the plantation era, who are now “the vibrant retirees who still share their knowledge and talents as community leaders.” It begins with two chapters outlining the history of the first and second waves of Filipina workers to move to Hawaii to work on plantations. Here, Brown covers the facts in scholarly detail, while also giving a sense of the less tangible cultural impact these women had, and continue to have.

The next six chapters are a collection of stories written by the children and grandchildren of these early plantation workers. They are arranged by the island from which each story originates, though many of the recollections seem universal rather than regionally specific. There are stories of backbreaking labor, but also heartwarming memories of love and close-knit families.

Brown concludes the book by reflecting on her own heritage and the opportunities she and other descendants have had because of the dreams and determination of the first plantation workers. “We are living the pieces of their dreams,” she writes, “that are tied to the great American dream.”

While Brown’s collection isn’t an exhaustive history of this period in Hawaii, the personal stories combined with contextual and historical data make it a rounded and balanced look at the lives of early plantation workers. Hard data like passenger manifests from incoming ships mix with personal memories and even family keepsakes like recipes, home remedies, and family photos. This makes the book both a valuable history and a celebration of the featured women’s culture and tenacity.

Brown’s excitement for her topic shines through; she sometimes glorifies the Filipina population in a manner not as objective as other history texts. The opening chapters include more speculation than is necessary about the feelings of the migrants, which seems out of place in an otherwise academically structured book. It is unclear at times whether lines like, “They shared exuberant smiles and happy tears as their ship cruised,” are drawn from actual records or extrapolated from Brown’s perspective.

Regardless, the text offers an unprecedented look at the life of the early Filipino community in Hawaii in astonishing detail and will be an invaluable addition to family records and the history of the state. *FILIPINAS!* is highly recommended for those with personal connections to this era, and for anyone with an interest in Hawaiian history.

ERIC ANDERSON (January 15, 2015)

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