Juan C. Dionisio:

Part II: The community leader and newspaperman

by Ramon Bolante

I asked Ambassador Dionisio at which point he had been the happiest, or what he thought he had achieved most of what he wanted to do to give meaning and purpose to his life, and he replied without hesitation, "Hawaii."

"Hawaii," he said with a glow in his eyes, because during the 4 ½ years that I served here from 1957-1962, the Filipinos gave me unstinting support in all areas especially in my efforts to form a statewide organization around which they could rally together and work for their political, social and economic advancement. There were many organizations but most, if not all of them, were parochial in outlook. There certainly was a need for these organizations, as there is now, because that was the recollection of our homeland which many immigrant citizens, but there was a greater need for a statewide organization that transcends the borders of town or province that can address the problems faced by all Filipinos in their daily lives.

"I was among those who tried to solve these problems on the Pacific Coast, long before I joined the government. When I came to Hawaii I was better equipped. I had behind me the prestige of my office and the availability of funds for travel. Thus, I was able to visit every plantation camp in every island in Hawaii as often as my official obligations permitted, holding meetings and raising funds, expounding on my plan for a statewide organization and asking for support.

"I reminded them that statehood for Hawaii was approaching – and shouldn't Filipinos who were second to another second 10,000 among the other groups in Hawaii, were only to the Japanese who numbered 160,000 the Caucasians were comparatively very few [illegible] statehood, contribute something to the statehood celebrations?

"I told them that we would form a statewide organization for all the Filipinos and we would hold a 3-day Fiesta Filipina with a carnival and there would be Filipino games like 'sipa-sipa,' 'Juego de Anillo,' and climbing the greased pole. We'd select a Fiesta Queen on the basis of beauty, talent and personality and run on the basis of each ballots or not been the custom, and around her, we'd present programs that would showcase Filipino culture including cooking demonstrations.

"The UFCH (United Filipino Council of Hawaii) is the result of the first annual statewide convention of Filipino community associations which was held in 1968; it has since existed a convention every even years then. Its continued existence proves the validity and relevance of its original objectives.

"One keen observer of the Hawaiian scene immediately before and during the winter of statehood was Prof. Lawrence H. Fuchs of Brandeis University. In his book, *Hawaii Pono: A Social History*, he commented on the organization efforts of the Filipinos during that time:

"'Impending statehood quickened Filipino unity in Hawaii. Carol Hayden Hanna said the success of statehood in organize Filipino community councils in every island for the purpose of fostering the political, economic and social aims of the Filipinos in Hawaii. Dionisio, mindful of divisions among Ilocano, Tagalog and and Visayan dialect groups maintained, 'The Filipinos must first achieve unity through a common identification before they can be successfully weighed into the community.'

"What I did in 1958-59 was to stir our people, especially those who had become American citizens, to see their right to vote to not relinquish for themselves from the larger community," Dionisio explained. "I told them not to just look up their citizenship papers in the vault and look to the glory of American citizenship. Use the paper to vote! Get into politics!"

This stirring up, this business of arousing the sense of pride as Filipinos was greeted with approval by the Honolulu papers. Commenting on Dionisio's farewell speech at a Chamber of Commerce luncheon on the eve of his departure for Singapore in 1961, the Honolulu Advertiser said in its editorial:

"Hawaii's Filipinos are just beginning to emerge into the broad stream of community life. Dionisio said he feels that his greatest accomplishment in his four years here has been to encourage this trend, to help steer it into constructive channels.

"The Minister is greatly entitled to feel that satisfaction, for he has indeed done a superb job for his fellow countrymen, citizens and non-citizens alike. He has worked tirelessly with humility and patience – and Hawaii is a better place for it.

"Dionisio says he hopes to retire within a few years and return to Hawaii to live and resume working for the betterment of the Filipinos here. We share that hope. There will always be a place in Hawaii for Juan C. Dionisio."

Juan C. Dionisio taking a phone call at the Hawaii Filipino News Office on Bethel Street.

Consul General Dionisio and his wife, Anna on their 25th wedding anniversary.

The ambassador and his wife, Anna (sharks of Hamtramck) did not intend to return to Hawaii when they returned here in June 1979 after 13 years. They had planned to return to Manila but their children, Patricia, Juan, Jr., and Roberto prevailed upon them to stay. (The youngest, William, was in Iran working for an American construction firm [illegible] contract to the Iranian government.

"So you stayed and played golf," I told him.

"Yes," he replied. "But as we can do that every day so I thought 'Why not publish a paper for the Filipino community?' I decided to indulge a first love and started the *Hawaii Filipino News*. In California, I published a paper called *The Filipino Voice* a fortnightly and in 1958, I edited the *Philippine Journal*, the official organ of the Filipino Agricultural Laborers Association of which I later became president. I gave up

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the *Hawaii Filipino News* when I had a heart bypass operation."

When I asked the ambassador of his plans for the future, he exclaimed, "The future!" He looked at me and smiled. "You know, my dear, at this age, one does not think of the future. I have a project though – a novel about the Filipino immigrants of the 1920's. I also have the Filipino Congress to bring me home.

Dionisio has written for Manila magazines like the *Free Press*, *Graphic* and *Philippine Magazine*. One of his short stories was included in an anthology published by Houghton Mifflin Company in 1972 entitled, *Asian American Writers*.

He paused as if reflecting and then looked at me.

"The future," he mused, "is a playful of uncertainty. I am quoting Carl Sandburg, I think. He wrote 'The past is a burden of ashes; the future a playful of tomorrows.'

Begging your pardon

Some readers have inquired if there was any previous information missing in the caption to the group photo which accompanied the first part of this interview published in our November issue. Indeed there was and we beg everyone's pardon. The photo showed President Harry S. Truman signing the bill making Anaco the first Liner to belong to become naturalized American citizens. The signing was done in the Oval Office of the White House on July 3, 1946.