

CAMILA LABOR CARIDO

Camila Labor Carido's early years prepared her well for the adult responsibilities that were thrust on her as a teenager. Born in 1910 in the village of Hinundayan, Leyte, in the Philippine Islands, she and three sisters were left behind with their mother, Macaria, when her father emigrated to the United States. Without a father in the house, mother and children had to fend for themselves in the coastal plains of the island where they lived.

Food on the table often had to be picked from the wild. Now in her 90s, Camila remembers having sweet potatoes that grew near their home as a regular staple of their daily meals. As a child, she accompanied her mother on forays into the jungle of the small island where they lived to dig for sweet potatoes. While they were out, she would venture away from her mother, poking her digging implement into the ground, hoping to strike a cache of the nourishing, fleshy root. But she could always hear her mother cautioning her not to go "beyond the island."

She frequently wondered just what *was* across the water beyond the edge of the island. But Camila always minded her mother, even when she took a step toward feeling almost "grown-up", a feeling which came when she finally was allowed to venture out alone, when she was about eight or nine, to dig for sweet potatoes.

While she was out digging, going about town or attending social functions with her mother and sisters, the young 14-year old Camila, still a schoolgirl, attracted the attention of an older man, a local widower. She could tell he was interested in her. He followed her around, apparently in hopes of becoming a suitor. After all, Camila had learned English, a highly prized skill, and she was schooled in domestic arts—sewing, cooking, keeping house—as if in preparation for the day when she would have her own household. What a bride she would

make for any man, especially one who had already lost a wife! Although his interest in her made Camila feel older and more grown-up, she rebuffed his attentions and made it clear she didn't want him to touch her or even to follow her around. She was already quite an independent soul!

In 1929, a turn of events for her father, Manuel Labor, changed her own life forever. He had married again in the United States and now had a second family. Suddenly, when Camila was not yet 19 years old, her father's wife died and left him with two children, ages four and six, to rear. Mr. Labor lived in Hollister, California, where he had a good job in a packing plant. But with no wife, the widowed father had to make other arrangements for his children, leaving them with one friend or another on a "catch as catch can" basis. He called back to the Philippines for one of his four daughters to come and help him care for his young family. As one sister was already married and the next eldest was engaged to be married, it fell upon Camila to answer his call.

She was not unhappy about coming to America. "I wanted to see America," she declared. "I thought that in America money would be lying all over the ground, and I could just reach down and pick it up." Her mother thought of America as a land of educational opportunities and was glad for Camila's chance to go. So Camila left Leyte for the United States to reunite in Hollister with a father she hardly knew, to become a caregiver to two young children she had never met. When she left the Philippines, Camila never realized that she would never see her own mother alive again. Macaria Labor died soon after the end of World War II, more than 16 years after Camila left the Philippines and long before she was able to go back to visit the place of her youth.

As an 18 year old, Camila Labor gladly took on the role of mothering her two young half-siblings. Whether or not she felt it, whether or not she was ready, with no celebration or rituals, she was now an adult. The English she had already learned to speak was to serve her well in her new home. And because she had been taught the domestic arts, she was well prepared for her role in her father's

household. When Camila was asked about the most valued achievement that marked her becoming an adult, she replied that it was taking care of her young siblings. She said she was happy that she could do that, and throughout her life she never thought of them as half-brother and half-sister. From the time they first came under her care, Camila never questioned the nature of their relationship to her; she loved them and took care of them as if they were her own mother's children.

Having worked in Hollister for a few years in the same job, Mr. Labor had become a well-respected member in the community. Living there with her father and siblings, Camila was able to continue going to school for a while, making new friendships with her Caucasian classmates. She knew no Filipinos outside her father's family. Within her small world, she felt comfortable and encountered no discrimination, a situation that would be different when she moved to Stockton a few years later. Remembering those years, Camila commented, "Everyone was kind to me in Hollister. I never had any problems there."

In 1932, a few years after arriving in the United States, Camila had met and married Leon Carido, forever dashing the hopes of the widower left behind in the Philippines. The young couple eventually moved to Stockton, bringing with them Camila's half-brother and half-sister to live with them and grow up in what was now the Carido household. They were helpful to her when the Carido children were born, one after another. The house was filled with the sounds of laughter and activity from six Carido children and their young aunt and uncle.

The parents had to work hard to support the family. Contrary to what Camila has once imagined, money was not to be found on the streets. Both of them worked in the fields as farm laborers. Eventually, Camila found work in the Flotill cannery in Orland where she was employed for 22 years.

Camila Carido's nurturing ways and her personal spirit, developed as a girl and strengthened as a young woman, served her well when the Carido home in

South Stockton became a haven for the bachelor Filipino men who worked in the agricultural fields around Stockton. Discriminatory practices against Filipinos prevailed in Stockton in the early 20th century, even as the United States was importing Filipino men for work. Stockton at one time was reputed to have the largest Filipino community outside the Philippines, and this may well have been true during the summertime agricultural season.

At that time, most of the Filipinos in Stockton, as elsewhere, were men, as it was extremely difficult under American immigration laws for Filipino women to enter the United States. And California's anti-miscegenation laws of the time forced the bachelors among them to remain single.

But the Caridos opened their home to the Filipino bachelors who had nowhere to go. Many were from Mr. Carido's hometown in the Philippine Islands; some were relatives, some were friends, and others were just friends of friends. Restrictive covenants prevented Filipinos from moving wherever they could afford, and most Stockton residential hotels weren't open to Filipino occupancy. Over the years, more than 16 Filipinos, who happened to be single or who were new immigrants to this country, regularly took meals with the Carido family. All were laborers who came to the Carido house for food and socialization. They played pinochle and other card games with each other and spent much of their free time there. The men pooled their money to buy the food that Camila cooked and put on the table. They came for lunch, sometimes came back at "suppertime," and a few roomed there on occasion.

During the Great Depression, Filipino families in Stockton struggled, as did other families throughout the city and the country. This young Filipina mother and wife, whose diminutive stature belied the size and breadth of her big heart and undaunted spirit, was always there to help Filipino families who were having difficult times. She provided food, clothing, helped with advice and information; she listened to their problems with a sympathetic ear, empathized with their feelings, and worked with them to devise solutions to their problems.

Sometimes it meant taking care of their children and even taking them in temporarily.

Camila explains those years by saying simply, “We are Christians. We had to help them.”

A deeply religious woman, Camila Carido was empowered by her upbringing and by her faith. Her advice to her children and her grandchildren (and indeed, to four generations of Carido descendants) embodies those two elements of her own experience—church and family.

Her mother, Macaria Labor, set the example for her and lived the advice she gave to young Camila: “Prepare to be a good wife, keep a clean house, cook nutritious meals, don’t forget to go to church,” and “don’t fool around.” Camila Carido adds to that advice, saying, “Respect your mother. Even if she’s wrong. Listen to her advice.” In her opinion, society is well served by giving respect to one’s parents and elders. She believes that personal sacrifice is an important element in one’s life and strengthens an individual.

Religious faith among the Labor children, especially in the Philippines, was paramount. Macaria Labor in Leyte taught catechism, led novenas (special prayers of entreaty over a nine-day period) and was a cantor who sang prayer responses during church services. She also prepared children for their first communion in the Catholic Church. Camila followed in her footsteps and fulfilled all those roles as a mother to her own children and a parishioner at St. George’s Catholic Church. She strongly believes in the power of prayer. “Prayer is a good thing for everybody,” she said. “It doesn’t matter if you did something wrong or not. Pray anyway.”

And her motto? Camila Carido would tell her descendants: “Enjoy life within the Power of the Lord.”

NOTE: Sadly, Camila Carido passed away not long after the interview, which is the subject of this writing. A leader and activist in the Filipino community since first arriving in Stockton in the 1930s, she leaves behind a legacy of several

organizations she led or founded to assist Filipinos in embracing their background and culture, including the Filipino Plaza, a housing complex that she fought to get built. She was known affectionately as “Mama Lilay” or “Grandma Lilay” to scores, if not hundreds, of Filipinos in the city. Camila Labor Carido is mourned by a large, loving extended family, the many individuals whom she helped, and a community that has been enriched by her presence.

Author: G. Lee
Interviewer: Dianne Gini
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