

San Jose: Parish, Town & People

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The author, a true son of San Jose whose forebears from both sides going back many generations were from the town, served in the diplomatic service of the Philippines. He was assigned to seven different countries including the former Soviet Union, Canada and Australia, and was Chief of Protocol of the Department of Foreign Affairs at the time of his retirement. Ambassador Ona and his wife Elizabeth, who also served in the diplomatic service, have two accomplished children. He now pursues his life-long interest in history, genealogy and farming.)

This story is about the formation of a community that evolved from families within a geographical area, into an organized parish and town.

Before the coming of the Spaniards, Malayan migrants from the South came and drove away the Aetas who were the first inhabitants of the region. The newcomers settled along the shores of Lake Bonbon (later called Taal) in the old towns of Bauan, Taal, Lipa and Tanauan. The Spanish conquistador Juan de Salcedo brought this area under Spanish control. Spanish town emerged with houses built of strong materials.

Bauan was a parish administered by Spanish friars of the Order of St. Augustine. Originally at the foot of Mt. Makulot, it was submerged by the rising waters of the lake due to the periodic eruptions of the volcano and relocated at least three times until 1692 when, after the volcano's big eruption of 1690, it moved to its present site.

I. Establishment of Parish and Town

Many of Bauan's inhabitants dispersed inland in the place called Malaquing Tubig. Named after the river of clear water passing through it, this place was high enough to ensure a pleasant climate the whole year round. At first forested, slash-and-burn farmers cultivated the area and transformed it into a quilt of rice and corn fields as well as orchards. It is rolling land, topped by two prominent features: Mt. Makulot and Bigain Hill.

The area of Malaquing Tubig included, besides its present one, the town of Cuenca, and therefore Mt. Makulot and a stretch of Taal Lake shore. Cuenca separated from San Jose on 7 April 1877.

San Jose celebrates 26 April 1765, written on the historical marker in the church's façade, as its foundation date. Most probably it is the date when the residents of Sitio Malaquing Tubig signed a petition for its partition from Bauan and its establishment as a separate parish and town.

When the petition, now worm-eaten and illegible, eventually reached the office of the Governor General, an assistant commented:

"Regarding the petitioned dismemberment of the town of Baguan (sic), it is necessary to consult the Fr. Minister so that he may not be deprived of part of the parish he is administering. Your Excellency could request and urge Your Superior discretion said Fr. to report on the plea of the petitioners. Manila 15 November 1766. Don Veyra."

Governor General Jose Antonio Raon y Gutierrez's letter to Fr. Jose Victoria, parish priest of Bauan, has been eaten by bookworms. However, Fr. Victoria's reply, handwritten at the end of the letter on the same sheet of paper, fortunately for us is well preserved:

"Very Illustrious Sir. In virtue of the Superior Decree of request and demand of Your Lordship for a report on the petition of some natives of the Town of Bauan, to break away from the parish of said Town and form a separate Town in the sitio of Malaquingtubig; I have to say that said petition is very just and in order, firstly because of the great distance in which they are from the church of said Town, and also because the increased number of said Town's taxpayers. Therefor no damage whatever will result to my said parish; wherefore I defer to the superior discretion of Your Lordship to decide what in justice you think most convenient. Convento de San Agustin of Manila on 1 December 1766. Fr. Joseph Victoria."

The parish and town of San Jose was inaugurated on 26 April 1767, with a Mass said by Fr. Jose Victoria. We read in this same month another petition from "*The Gobernadorcillo (mayor), Cavezas de Barangay, Principales and other residents who constitute the new town of S. Joseph, established with the permission of Your Lordship in the sitio of Malaquingtubig, province of Balayan...*" The residents this time were petitioning the Governor General for a grant of money to buy the sacred vessels, ornaments and bell, as decreed by the Spanish Monarch for new parishes in the Islands. It appears that the provincial treasurer in Balayan was requiring as a condition for the grant, the finished construction of the church, convent and municipal building.

The residents alleged that they could not finish construction because of the "*destruction of their crops, lost because of severe storms and the attack of locusts*" and other circumstances related to a new town, such as building houses while planting new crops. The new town's Gobernadorcillo Ygnacio de los Santos and other principal residents signed this petition.

II. Parish and Church

Fr. Jose Victoria who figures in the town's establishment was the parish priest of Bauan, where he built the church in 1762. To honor his patron Saint, the town was named San Jose de Malaquing Tubig. The Augustinian Chapter of 9 May 1767 named Fr. Agustin Hordegozo as the town's parish priest. He was in Tiaong so it was some time before he could take possession of San Jose. In the meantime, Fr. Victoria serviced the parish from Bauan.

In the early years, the church was a temporary structure of cogon and bamboo. Fr. Tomas Cañon replaced it with one made of lime and pebbles. In 1812, Fr. Manuel Blanco, the famous botanist, became parish priest. While studying local plants and flowers and writing his monumental *Flora de Filipinas*, he built a new church made of masonry.

The cogon-covered roof of the church burned down in 1847. Fr. Roman Sanchez continued the restoration work on the church, built the belfry, and finished the convent. Fr. Bruno Laredo built schools and a beautiful stone bridge over the Malaquing Tubig. He also bought the huge bell that fell during an earthquake and is no longer in use. Fr. Vicente Maril roofed the church with galvanized iron. Fr. Victorino Perez restored the convent and completed works on the church, including that on the transept and the dome.

The 1898 revolution expelled the Spanish friars from the Philippines. A page in the Book of Baptisms preserved in the parish archives bears the last entry signed by the Spanish parish priest, Fray Manuel de Arostegui of the Order of St. Augustine. Its date was 28 May 1898. On the same page, an entry dated 1 June 1898 bears the signature of the Filipino secular priest Fr. Vicente Jose Romero, with the title of Parish Priest of San Jose.

On 1 April 1899, the Filipino secular priest Juan Geronimo Luna, a native of the town, was appointed parish priest. Padre Imo is now remembered for the town's waterworks and the site of the elementary school (Padre Imo Memorial Elementary School or PILMES) for which his heirs contributed a substantial amount to the town in his memory.

By 1911 there were no more Filipino priests available to attend to the people. A Capuchin friar was called to administer the parish. Then the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, from the Netherlands, came to the

Philippines. The Italian bishop of Lipa, Mons. Giuseppe Petrelli, persuaded them to take charge of some parishes in the diocese. They stayed in San Jose from July 1911 to 1915. Besides administering the parish, they set up a small major seminary consisting of one who was reviewing for ordination; another in his third year of theology, two in the first year theology, and the rest, philosophers. These seminarians had studied in Manila. The seminary was short-lived for the MSH left the diocese in 1915.

In 1915, Bishop Petrelli found a religious congregation willing to send missionaries to the Philippines on a more permanent basis. This was the Oblates of St. Joseph, founded by the Blessed Joseph Marelló along the spirituality of St. Joseph, the head and protector of the Holy Family. The Oblates were the first Italian congregation to send missionaries to the Philippines. San Jose became their first foreign mission.

The first Oblates (three priests and two brothers) arrived in Manila by ship on 25 August 1915. That same night they took the train to San Jose where they were welcomed with the prolonged ringing of bells. Since then, they have been in charge of the parish. Their superior, Fr. Jose Anfossi, became the parish priest of San Jose, with responsibility also for Cuenca, until his death in August 1921.

Fr. Eugenio Gherlone succeeded Fr. Jose Anfossi and immediately began reconstruction of the church. He finished the dome. His successor, Fr. Luis Mortera, finished the reconstruction of the church, which was beautified by paintings of St. Joseph “Guardian of Virgins”, “Patron of the Dying”, “Model of Laborers” and “Protector of the Holy Church”, with an altar in which was carved the death of St. Joseph in the arms of the Virgin and Jesus. Fr. Luis was also responsible for setting up the iron communion rails and lowering the windows for better light and ventilation.

After the expulsion of the Spanish friars, the people miraculously preserved their Catholic faith, keeping the traditional external practices of processions, novenas, May floral offerings to the Virgin, home visits of the statue of St. Joseph, Christmas, Holy Week, March 19 festivities. However, during the rest of the year, Sunday Mass was attended mostly by women and children. The few men who attended developed the habit of leaving the church during sermons to smoke and gossip, returning inside for more gossip after the sermons. The Second World War revived the religiosity of the people, who endured untold suffering and death.

In 1968, Fr. Lucio Aguilar and his parochial vicar, Fr. Raymundo G. de la Cruz began a major reconstruction, concluded by its blessing on 26 April 1970. The leaking roof was repaired, the windows lowered for more ventilation, the altar area and communion rails redecorated, new murals were painted.

In 2000, the parish has retaken possession of the convent, which had long been used by the Cursillo movement as venue for its retreats. Fr. Ronnie Alkonga, OSJ, began the much-needed repair on the roof and ceiling, as well as the redesigning of the area to accommodate, among others, a parish museum. The church was beautified. The adoration chapel and Jubilee stage were constructed. The altars were restored, and additional murals painted.

From the very beginning of the parish, the people of San Jose have contributed personal labor, expertise and money for the building and beautification of their church and convent. Testimonies of our elders narrate how barangays took turns carrying stones, sand wood, mortar and other material to the site and fashioning out of them the beautiful church, convent and patio that we have today. Their simple faith inspires us to contribute whatever we can so that our church and convent will be worthy of the Lord and our Patron St. Joseph.

More valuable than the church is the Christian faith and the devotion to St. Joseph bequeathed to us by our ancestors. According to the testimony of our elders, every March 19, the feast of St. Joseph, hundreds of pilgrims from neighboring towns journeyed on foot or on horseback to San Jose to pay homage to the foster father of Jesus. Townspeople traditionally gave them shelter for the night. Modern means of transportation have done away with the tradition of “panunuluyan”, but due to the number of vehicles during the fiesta, the streets are barely passable in the morning when Masses and confirmations are celebrated.

In 1992, Brgy. Tampoy and Brgy. Banaybanay 2 were transferred to the Parish of San Vicente, Lipa City; and Brgy. Pinagtungulan was transferred to the Parish of Sto. Niño, Lipa City due to geographic reason. The said transfer took place during the term of Fr. Deody Dawis, OSJ as parish priest.

On 19 March 2001, during the term of Fr. Joey Apin, OSJ, as parish priest, the church of San Jose, on the Jubilee 2000 pilgrimage sites for the Archdiocese of Lipa, was proclaimed by Archbishop Gaudencio Rosales

as an Archdiocesan Shrine. At the instigation of Fr. Alkonga, some parishioners have formed an association called "Knights of St. Joseph" with the aim of spreading knowledge of and devotion to St. Joseph.

III. Municipal Government

The first gobernadorcillo (mayor) was Ignacio de los Santos (later Ona). The appointment paper of Ventura Aguila as gobernadorcillo (1890-91) (refer to page 125 of the Town of San Jose Chapter) contains an enumeration of the duties of the gobernadorcillo, who embodies the civil government of the town. He is charged-

"with the specific duty of effectively seeing to it that the inhabitants of the town attend the religious instruction and Mass on holy days of obligation, and comply with the yearly obligation of our Holy Mother Church, in which item he will assist the Parish Priest; that there be no prohibited gambling, drunkenness, scandals or other notorious sins; keeping the town in peace and order, that no one use arms without license; that all attend to agriculture, or the arts, or shops, without tolerating idleness or misunderstandings; that the inhabitants raise animals and plant rice, wheat, corn, vegetables, sugar cane, coffee, pepper, cotton, indigo, cacao, coconut and other profitable fruit trees, as provided for by ordinance and other repeated orders of this Government General; finally, one of his primary duties will be to care for the maintenance of roads or public thoroughfares, zealously repairing or immediately rebuilding the broken ones, to which task he shall strictly oblige all the taxpayers of the town, whether natives or mestizos, as provided by order; he shall be knowledgeable about what the laws provide on civil matters as well as on criminal ones. He shall observe punctually what has been ordered on the security and branding of livestock, and he shall go after all kinds of thieves until their extermination. He shall attend to the prompt and faithful collection of tributes and other branches of the Royal Finance, as well as the public property under the direction of the Chief of his province and the Finance Administrator."

During the Spanish period, there was union of Church and State. The highest positions in the national and provincial governments were held by Spaniards; however, the town officials were mostly natives of the town. No wonder then that in San Jose, the mayor and other town officials deferred to the Spanish friars who reported to both ecclesiastical and civil authorities on the state of affairs in the town. A fact that further weakened the position of the mayor was the shortness of his tenure of one to two years.

The Augustinian friars who presided over the town until May 1898 supervised the setting up of the town: laying out of the streets, cemetery, drainage canals, digging of wells for water, building of bridges. They taught the people how to build stone houses. Most of all, they looked into the construction of the church and convent.

The Americans introduced the popular vote as the method for choosing town officials. A notable politician was Fernando A. Aguila. Presidenteng Andoy won all the elections he participated in. He had the habit of, after his term, supporting the opponent he had defeated, with one exception. In 1935, a group of young professionals advocating reform, headed by Dr. Leonardo Ona, Sr., challenged him. The election was passionately contested. A hotheaded partisan dispersed a "miting de avance" of Ona by firing his pistol into the air. Elections have been generally peaceful and free from the bloodshed that accompanies elections in some other towns.

Catholicism, although still influential, no longer enjoys the predominant position in both religious and civic affairs that it had during the Spanish regime. Many other religious groups are present in the town.

In the 1920s, some prominent men formed a Masonic lodge in San Jose which met in a house called Dimasalang. The house has survived war and time, but the lodge is no longer active.

Together with Lipa, San Jose prospered in the coffee boom of the 19th century until insect pests and parasitic fungi attacked the plants. The same happened to the short-lived orange boom in the 1960s. Coffee enjoyed a brief comeback in the 1980s but since then has declined due to dwindling prices.

Today, the town's economy is varied. It has three banks supplying the needs of small farmers and businessmen. Poultry and hog raising are principal sources of income. Fruits and vegetables are produced. Rice, corn, sugar and mango are also produced in limited quantities.

IV. Significant Events

As we have seen, the revolution against Spain disrupted the life in San Jose. We have no record of a significant uprising in the town. However, some inhabitants must have participated in the armed struggle because a prominent resident, Don Luis Luna, was the secretary of General Miguel Malvar who waged war against both the Spaniards and the Americans.

The war years at the turn of the century exacted a heavy toll on the inhabitants. The turmoil affected agricultural production. Malnutrition made the populace vulnerable to the epidemics of malaria and cholera. Marlou O. Castillo, in his paper that won the prestigious Sixto K. Roxas award at De La Salle University, notes from 16,677 in 1899, the population dropped to 14,991 in 1903. Among the cholera casualties of this period was Juan Ona y Luna, 31, the town's first medical graduate from the University of Sto. Tomas.

After a period of repression, the American administration turned benevolent and promoted education and local administration. Life improved. Those who could afford it sent their children to school. More students from San Jose frequented the Batangas High School and pursued tertiary education in Manila.

Anxiety over a possible spill-over of the war in Europe heightened in the late 1930s. Army camps were set up in Batangas and Lipa for the training of army recruits. The inhabitants of San Jose made money selling bamboo and other construction materials for the camps, as well as rice, meat and other food items.

War broke out in the Pacific on 7 December 1941 (8 December in the Philippines) with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Few days later, people had their first taste of war. Over San Jose, 27 Japanese planes were flying in multiple V formation when a lone Filipino plane appeared to engage them in combat. A couple of the Japanese planes detached themselves from the formation and swooped down on Lt. Cesar Basa whose plane went down in smoke in Barangay Dagatan.

Those who could evacuated to the barrios. There they heard the "balitang cochero" of how the Phil-American forces were defeating the Japanese on all fronts. Reality sank in only with the surrender of Corregidor on 6 May 1942, and the return one by one of the San Jose soldiers who survived the death march and the concentration camp at Capas, Tarlac. Life returned to relative normality. From the barrios, people returned to the town.

It was a hard life under the Japanese. The school opened in 1942. Classes were held in two sessions: morning and afternoon, with all the students in school year 1941-42 considered as promoted, despite the months of schooling lost. Sometime later, the school was commandeered as quarters for part of the Japanese army. Classes were transferred to the municipal building. The Japanese loved the cool climate of the town as well as its excellent water supply. A frequent spectacle that revolted the sensitivities of the womenfolk was the sight of Japanese walking on the streets with just a g-string and towel for a bath at the fire hydrants.

People had to bow low to the sentries posted in some street corners. Those who failed to do so knowingly or unknowingly, were subjected to slaps and blows. However, there were also two instances of human kindness. A Japanese named Sonota fetched water for the Lipa airbase from the fire hydrant at Makalintal Avenue cor Ona St. by means of a tanker. He was friendly to the kids and sometimes gave them candies or sticks of scented cigarettes called Akibono. He said he reminded them of his children in Japan. A Japanese doctor used to visit Dr. Leonardo Ona. The two exchanged medical information, and the Japanese gave Dr. Ona quinine and sulfa tablets, which were no longer available in the market.

Commodities were scarce. The government set up the NAMARCO (National Marketing Company) as the exclusive distributor of most commodities. Concessionaries were appointed in San Jose.

In the beginning of 1945, Japanese atrocities began in earnest. Murder squads roamed the countryside, torturing and killing. On 21 January 1945, one such squad chanced upon a group of farmers. They captured

four of them. The parish priest, Fr. Vicente Prandi, and Dr. Leonardo Ona walked to Lipa to try to save them. Fr. Vicente appealed to the Japanese as a fellow Axis member, and Dr. Ona as a member of the medical profession whom the Japanese respected. They were told to go away lest they suffer the same fate as the farmers, namely death.

Because of the vicissitudes of war, towards the end of 1944 all Japanese units and properties had been withdrawn from San Jose. Only the cotton depot in Taysan was left, managed by the Japanese garrison in Cuenca. On 21 January 1945, so called guerrillas set this depot on fire. There was another exodus of people from the town to the barrios. On 27 January, Japanese soldiers encircled the town and herded into the town plaza those still left in the town. In spite of all kinds of intimidation among which were the burning of the houses on the western side of the plaza and the firing of machine guns over the captives' heads, one was able or willing to point out the perpetrators of the arson.

Finally, the Japanese took with them Fr. Vicente Prandi, the mayor Atty. Venancio Remo, the chief of police Nicomedes Luna, and the municipal clerk Mr. Jose Talag. Luna somehow managed to escape. The others were executed in sitio Ambon-ambon in Cuenca. Fr. Vicente's cause of beatification is now under study in Rome. Hopefully, the town will soon have the joy of seeing one of its parish priests given the honors of the altar.

Other victims of the Japanese authorities are listed elsewhere in this historical book. However, worth mentioning is Dr. Lorenzo Maralit, a graduate of medicine of Tokyo University, who stayed in town with a certain sense of security because besides speaking fluent Japanese, he was paralytic. The Japanese bound him with wire and threw him over the town bridge. Also worth mentioning were the Alabastros whom the Japanese tied to the posts in their house which they then set on fire.

As the war drew to a close, the townspeople were treated to the sight of daily bombings and strafing from American planes of the nearby airbase in Lipa. Sometimes Japanese casualties were brought to San Jose barrios to be cremated. The war finally ended, but not before the Japanese burned most of the old houses of San Jose.

Reconstruction began, helped by the payment of war damage by the Japanese. The Americans gave back pay to their former employees, the Filipino soldiers and guerillas. Some of the war victims were recognized as guerrillas and given benefits such as pension for their widows and scholarships for their children.

After the war, education became one of the primary concerns of the townfolks. Batangas High School was no longer adequate for the needs of the growing student population. Before the war, Dr. Concepcion Aguila, one of the founders of Centro Escolar, had established the San Jose Institute. This is now the Dr. Concepcion Aguila Memorial College. After the war, Dr. Leonardo H. Ona and his wife, Candelaria J. Aguila, established a high school called the St. Joseph Academy. To date, this high school has graduated a total of 7,946: 3,722 boys (47%) and 4,224 girls (53%), figures that reflect the changing social standing of the sexes in the town.

Also in the field of education, after the war two eminent educators from the town, Mr. Gregorio Lardizabal, Sr. and Mr. Jose C. Aguila succeeded each other as Division Superintendent of public schools for the province of Batangas. The sudden expansion of the public school system necessitated the recruitment of teachers. Mr. Lardizabal and Mr. Aguila were only too happy to take all the available qualified teachers of San Jose to fill in the vacancies in other towns. Many of these expatriates have settled down in their places of assignment and are now respected members of their adoptive towns.

After Independence, the Philippines and the United States agreed on a program of exchange of graduates for further training. Many from San Jose, especially in the medical and nursing professions, left for the United States to study and work in American hospitals. Most of them stayed in the U.S. or proceeded to Canada and the United Kingdom. After acquiring residence or citizenship status, they brought their parents and relatives. They also alerted their friends to the opportunities abroad. This was the first phase of the emigration that benefited the town of San Jose in terms of foreign exchange remittances.

Of even greater impact on the town's economy was the exodus of skilled and unskilled laborers for Vietnam, under contract with U.S. companies engaged in the war effort starting from the 1960s. When the Vietnam war ended, U.S. companies moved to the Middle East bringing with them their Filipino laborers. San Josenians were among them. Since they had neither the opportunity nor the inclination to remain in the

Middle East, they remitted their entire savings to their families. Many beautiful houses are testimonials of the labor of the expatriates.

The town's prosperity is not without its drawbacks. The poultry and piggery that brought income to many, at the same time polluted rivers. Thick smoke from exhaust of motor vehicles caused eye and lung diseases. In 1994, typhoid epidemic caused the suspension of classes and made the town the focus of the national media. Since then, authorities have been paying attention to the environment.

The declaration of Martial Law in 1972 froze the officialdom of the town which remained unchanged until the overthrow of the dictatorship in February 1986. The town has progressed under all kinds of political regimes. Schools, both private and public, good roads and bridges, hardware stores and other commercial establishments, restaurants and banks are some of the signs on the continuing vitality and progress of the town, brought about by the people with the support of expatriates all over the world who still consider the town as their native land. The present historical book is an attempt to record the town's past events and accomplishments.

Many accounts have been made of the town's history: Atty. Jose de Villa's writings; the "History and Cultural Life of the Town of San Jose", a compilation made by public school teachers under the chairmanship of Mrs. Candelaria A. Ona; the Golden Book edited by Fr. Raymundo G. de la Cruz, OSJ, and containing his "Brief History of San Jose"; and "San Jose, Batangas: A Study in Historical Demography", an award winning thesis by Marlou O. Castillo of De La Salle University. Hopefully, all of these accounts, together with fresh research will someday be incorporated into a comprehensive history of San Jose, Batangas.