

A Filipino liberation shirt embroidered with 201 American Signatures



This is the believe-it-or-not story about a white sharkskin shirt hand-embroidered with 201 names. The hand written signatures which also carry their home addresses were those of American soldiers camped out in Talisay, Negros Occidental during the liberation of the Philippines in 1944. This shirt probably the only memento of its kind in existence, bridging our world today to the time when American liberation forces ended the Japanese occupation of the Philippines.

Rizalina Ravello de Oca, a genteel widow who now lives in Novaliches, keeps this shirt with loving care, and fingering it now, she says “ I wonder if they are still alive?” referring to all those liberation friends who had scribbled their names on this shirt she had sewn for her husband, Aniceto de Oca. Mr. Oca wore the shirt to his inauguration as councilor of the Republic of the Philippines, soon after we got our independence on July 4, 1946. Mr. Oca would also wear the shirt to church on Sundays.

Ms. Oca remembers clearly those liberation days and how life brightened up for them when Americans came. During the war, they had evacuated up a mountain side from where they could see the sea, and they saw American fleet come in and how the soldiers jumped on shore. “They did not pass the streets, they short-cut through the fields,” she recounts, also recalling how her family came down bringing with them their piano which they had brought with them to the mountain.

The American soldiers camped around their house, and of evenings, when the Oca family said their evening prayers and sang hymns, they would come around in respectful silence, but after a while the men would also burst into song along with them.

We would sing *Rock of Ages, Anywhere with Jesus, God Be With You, Til We Meet Again*, and they knew the words. But especially when we would sing *God Bless America* all of them would join, even those who stayed in their camps.

“My husband would ask them in. You know, when they first came, we gave them hard-boiled chicken eggs, camote candy and fried bananas which they loved. We asked what we could do for them, because we were so happy they had come,” and when their laundry problems came up, Rizalina and her immediate circle of friends and their maids offered to wash the soldiers uniform... and for free. It was just to express how happy they were to be free from Japanese rule at last.

In exchange, the Americans gave them soap, canned goods, powdered egg and powdered milk, and K-rations.

They had their fill of real butter, chocolate candies, and that was the first time they tasted Coke. With a gleam in her eyes, Ms. Oca adds that they did not even have to iron the uniforms. They just stretched them out.

That was the time she took out a piece of white sharkskin which she had been keeping, bought before the war from a store called Manila Remnants, sewed it into a shirt for her husband, who in turn had the soldiers scribble their names all over.

And now comes another incredible part of this story. Ms. Oca decided to keep the signatures for posterity by embroidering everything written down. Not having embroidery thread during those liberation days, she unraveled some woolen socks and used the wool to do backstitch painstakingly on each letter and loop. The signatures remain clear to this, some in blue, some in red, and brown and gray.

Ms. Oca had heard about the American Historical Library where the Thomas Jefferson Cultural Center is on Gil J. Puyat in Makati, but is not sure they would want it. If they do, then it will be another thing for Ripley, for being the first library to have a shirt.

Among the signatures on this white shirt, noted down at random, are of *Ray Hartman*, 829-7th Avenue, Fulton Ill.; *Arthur W. Lau*, 16830 Wilmington Ave., L. A.; *Major J. K. Marr*, *Chaplain S. M. Mutkey*, Alexandria, Louisiana; *John W. Coots, Jr.*, 5925 Aunan Way, L. A. Calif.; *Clavin Moore*, Graveton, Texas; and *Tom R. Van Denzon*, 120 E. Spring St., Appleton, Wis.

One indeed wonders how many of those 201 signatories are still around, and more so, how to get in touch with them.

For now, we wonder how many Filipino families have treasured memories of friendships from those liberation years. Here is proof of one of them, at least.

Source: Mr and Ms. July 3, 1990 p. 8,10



American Historical Collection

3rd Floor, Rizal Library Ateneo de Manila University
Loyola Heights, Quezon City

Established in 1950, the American Historical Collection consists of some 12,000 books, 16,000 photographs, and other materials related to the American experience in the Philippines and to the relationship of the two countries. With the possible exception of the holdings of the Library of Congress, it is the largest, most diverse and most complete in the world.

Ambassador Myron Cowen, who saw the devastation wrought by the war on many things including the memory of the times preceding it, encouraged the American community to donate books and other materials pertaining to the first half of the 20th century. His initiative was responsible for the early phase of the collection.

The collection used to be at the Thomas Jefferson Center at Makati after it moved from its original site at the U.S. Embassy. It is now kept at the Rizal Library of the Ateneo de Manila University. The Rizal Library is committed to preserve the collection following the high standards it uses when conserving its own holdings. Furthermore, it is committed to facilitate the research of scholars.

Filipinos and Americans are encouraged to donate appropriate books toward the development of this great collection.

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Library Hours: Mon.-Fri. 8:00 a.m.- 5:00 p.m.; Sat. 8:00 a.m.-12:00 nn.