

## Mahal Kong Ama (Dear Dad)

June 27, 2023

Dear dad, I just finished reading a book titled "The Book of Charlie." It is the story of a man who lived to be 109 years old, spending most of his life in the Kansas City, Missouri area. Charles "Charlie" White was born in 1905, passing away in 2014. He had more adventures crammed in those 109 years than several men. It helped that he exceeded the then life expectancy by a factor of 2.

Prior to even finishing the book, my thoughts turned to your life, living from 1889 to 1979. Your years were not quite as long as Charlie's but there are parallels. You both lost your fathers early, Charlie's father dying tragically at 42, while your father Simplicio passed away at 47. You were then in your senior year at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. The tragic news probably didn't reach you till weeks or even months later. Was your mother able to send a telegram? There were historic changes during both your lifetimes. Rapid technological progress in your chosen profession. Wrenching economic upheaval. War. In your mid-teens, you both had adventures others could only dream or fantasize about.

After graduating from high school, Charlie and two classmates set off from Kansas City to Los Angeles in a Model T Ford (the car belonged to one of the classmates' parents). KC to LA is 1,600 miles (about half the width of the United States). While that distance is not daunting by today's standards, this was 1922. There were no paved highways, no reliable maps, no gas stations or garages, no restaurants or hotels along the way. With limited range headlights, they couldn't drive at night for fear of taking the wrong route and getting lost. If you had a flat tire, you had to fix it yourself. Sometimes they relied on the kindness of strangers for a bottle of gasoline or a meal. But the three boys made it to LA. The return trip was even more adventurous. The owner of the Ford sold what was left of his vehicle and purchased a train ticket back to K.C. But Charlie and his remaining friend hitched rides on trains, just like the hoboes who became commonplace during the coming Great Depression. It was dangerous, with railroad police patrolling the cars and not hesitating to throw unauthorized passengers out.

In 1906, at the age of 16, you left your hometown of Bauan, Batangas to embark on a journey to Cincinnati, Ohio to attend a "technical" school prior to transferring to the University of Illinois. Your journey was much longer but wasn't quite as arduous as Charlie's. You didn't sleep in a car without a roof as they did. Charlie claimed that they slept under the car when it rained. But you took a *calesa* (horse drawn carriage) from Bauan to Manila, less than 100 miles away. How many days did that take? You embarked on a weeks' long journey across the Pacific, stopping in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Hawaii before arriving in San Francisco, California. Earlier that year, San Francisco was devastated by an earthquake, estimated to be 7.9 on the Richter scale (the scale was not developed till decades later). How much damage did you see? Did you ever wonder if a civil engineer could devise stronger structures to withstand earthquakes? Then you went on a train journey of 2,400 miles to Cincinnati, Ohio. Perhaps you even passed by Charlie's hometown of Kansas City.

## **Mahal Kong Ama (Dear Dad)**

The train carried you through an immense countryside so vast it could swallow the entire Philippine archipelago many times over. You finally arrived in Cincinnati to live at 114 Lyon St. The boarding house is still there, now occupied by University of Cincinnati students.

Why am I writing to you? Well, I sure wish you had kept a diary, like Charlie did. The author used this diary, along with interviews, to write the book. Then we could marvel at your adventures. I know, I'd already written a long essay about your life, "*Ala-ala sa Aking Ama*" (In Memory of My Father) and "*The Pensionado Story*." But I relied on others for information. Little came from your hand. You hardly wrote any letters, in contrast with your younger sister Maria, who wrote long letters to your mother while she was in Seattle, Washington more than ten years later. Pictures tell a thousand words. There's you on horseback, in jodhpurs and a pith helmet. That's quite a way to commute. You were sitting on a log with a hunting rifle, although I don't recall you ever owning a firearm of any kind. Perhaps you were trying to put meat on the table for your young family. Luzon was still covered with virgin forests and game was plentiful.

Charlie trained as a doctor, finishing up his degree from Northwestern University in Evanston, IL. Specializing in anesthesiology, he started with a bottle of ether poured over gauze to put patients to sleep. By the time he retired, they were using sophisticated gases and drugs administered intravenously. You went from gravel roads to multi lane ribbons of concrete, from wooden bridges to steel spans that could carry 20-ton vehicles. I wonder what kind of guidance you received from Frank Turner. Remember him? He was appointed by President Dwight Eisenhower to plan the U.S. Interstate highways.

Neither one of you really retired. Charlie practiced until his 90s, while you switched to real estate development after a government career spanning 46 years.

Dad, I could have written a book about you instead of just a couple of essays of several thousand words. "The Book of Vicente?" Perhaps I still can.

You loving *bunso*\*,  
Mario

\**bunso* is the Tagalog word for youngest child.

p.s. I'm sure you learned about it, but it was quite painful for me and millions of Filipinos to learn that the Post Office Building had burned down. It was a beautiful neoclassical building, designed by a pensionado architect. You pensionados sure left their mark on the country. You had an office there for ten years and were responsible for its upkeep. I hope the people whose neglect caused the fire rot in h---