

LAST STAND IN LITTLE MANILA

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# Preservation

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## IT HAS COME TO THIS

But Little Manila, Stockton, Ca.'s once vibrant Filipino enclave, does not lack for champions.

BY STEPHEN HOWIE PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD MORGENSTEIN



**O**N A STIFLINGLY hot summer afternoon in Stockton, Calif., a small group of second-generation Filipino Americans sits around a table in a cavernous Chinese restaurant called the Emerald. They have come here, to Little Manila, to reminisce about the neighborhood that once contained the largest Filipino population in the United States—and to prevent its oldest buildings from being torn down and forgotten. Fifty years ago the Emerald was a Filipino recreation center that sat at the thriving hub of Filipino social clubs, restaurants, meeting halls, and barbershops. There were Filipino tailors, Filipino boxers, and Filipino jazz musicians. Every morning Filipino laborers lined El Dorado Street, waiting for flatbed trucks to take them to pick asparagus, celery, and pears in the fields and orchards of the San Joaquin Valley, 80 miles east of San Francisco; they returned at night to dance and socialize in their own corner of this inland port on the San Joaquin River.

The unassuming cinderblock building where the members of the Little Manila Foundation swap their stories is one of only three that remain from the neighborhood's heyday. Next door stands an equally nondescript cinderblock building, now abandoned: the former Rizal Social Club, built in 1938 as a taxi dance-hall where Filipino men paid to dance with white women,

Last May the National Trust added Little Manila to its 2003 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.

something forbidden outside the confines of the club. A padlocked gate blocks the arched entrance to a third building, the Mariposa Hotel, all brick with boarded-up windows. The buildings huddle amid a wasteland of vacant lots enclosed by chainlink fences, the whole tableau barely discernible in the shadows of an elevated freeway. Mounted on street lamps, banners display sepia-toned photos of Filipinos who used to live here, put up by the city to honor the once-vibrant neighborhood. Nearby, white lettering on a simple brown sign proclaims "Little Manila Historic Site."

One of the diners, 31-year-old Dawn Mabalon, is too young to share many of the Little Manila stories. By the time she was a young girl, much of it was already gone. Not until she left Stockton for UCLA and started studying Filipino history did she begin to realize the historic significance of the neighborhood. Last summer, at Stanford University, Mabalon completed a doctorate in U.S. history focused on the Filipino American community in Stockton, and the issue of saving Little Manila has become her passion.

A compact, energetic woman, Mabalon has short, dark hair and a manner that is quick and to the point. Four years ago, she watched, powerless, as city workers tore down the building that had housed the Lafayette Lunch Counter, run by her grandfather from 1930 until 1977; it was part of an entire block demolished to make way for a McDonald's and an adjoining 76 gas station, the latest in a string of redevelopment projects. Now a developer wants to raze the last vestige of Little Manila to clear space for a parking lot at a planned Asian-oriented strip mall. Mabalon is determined that the trio of survivors will not come down without a fight.

"It's not just about these buildings," says Mabalon, who heads the Little Manila Foundation, which is also documenting the neighborhood's past; "it's about a Filipino American voice in the political and cultural landscape in Stockton and people feeling empowered so that they can say something. At the very least, it has galvanized hundreds of people to think about their lives and their history, to cherish what they can pass along to their children, and for us to make sure that whatever we have right now, we don't let it go."

WAVES OF FILIPINO MEN came to Stockton in the 1920s and '30s, lured by the abundance of agricultural jobs and stories about young Filipinos getting rich in America. Some made the trip as teenagers in search of a better life. Others left families, promising to return once they made their fortune.

The immigrants' lives were complicated by the discrimination they faced outside Little Manila. Filipinos venturing north of Main Street were in danger of being beaten or arrested. Storefront signs proclaimed, "No Dogs and No Filipinos Allowed." At the Fox Theater, Filipinos were relegated to the side aisles; center seats were reserved for white patrons. Even within the Asian community south of Main Street, Filipinos were low in the pecking order: Chinese Americans ran the casinos where Filipinos gambled, and Japanese Americans ran many of the farms where Filipinos worked. Although their labor was essential to the success of the valley, Filipinos were not allowed to become citizens or own land.



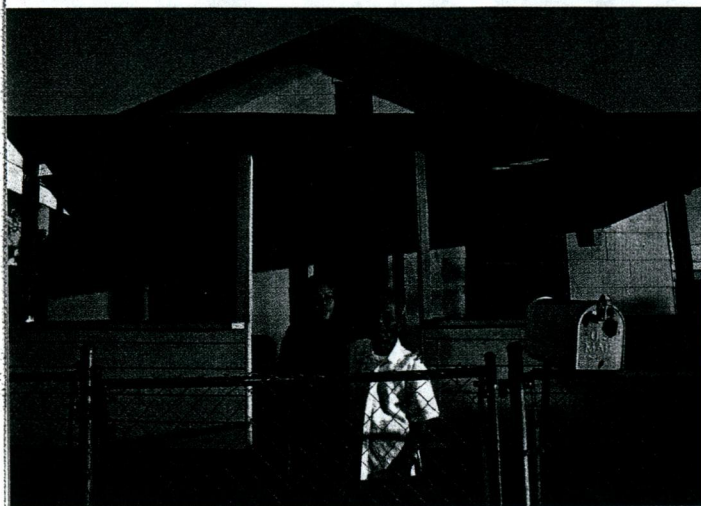
The Rizal Social Club on July 4, 1939, above, and today, sandwiched between two other survivors, opposite top. Saving the three buildings is the passion of Dawn Mabalon, head of the Little Manila Foundation, opposite bottom, under the marquee of another club nearby.

In the first decades of Filipino immigration to Stockton, men outnumbered women by 14 to one. Economic pressures often prevented Filipino wives from accompanying their husbands to America, and rigid gender roles stopped young Filipino women from making the trip alone. Miscegenation laws prevented Filipinos from marrying whites, and with so few women in Stockton to choose from, many men did not start families until their 50s and 60s. The aftereffects of this skewed generation gap are evident in the family makeup of the diners at the Emerald: 25-year-old Debbie Reyes has a 96-

year-old father, and Tony Somera, 46, has uncles who lived into their 80s and 90s and never married.

Amid the tight strictures of society outside Little Manila, the neighborhood became all the more important. Only within its blocks could Filipinos escape their status and express themselves as something more than laborers. "Filipinos were working in the fields, but in their other lives, they were photographers, jazz musicians, artists," Mabalon says. "When they came to Little Manila, they were different people."

At night the sound of Ilokano and Tagalog dialects filled the streets as young men dressed in zoot suits and fedoras bet on games of pool at the Bataan Pool Hall or lined up for dances at



Debbie Reyes, 25, and her 96-year-old father, Philip, outside his home in Stockton. Below, one of the banners put out by the city in recognition of Little Manila's former civic leaders.

the Rizal Social Club. Billed as America's first air-conditioned Filipino-owned nightclub, it boasted a jazz band led by Filipino guitarist Ernie Hernandez, a local legend, that pumped out the latest songs.

Next door, the lobby of the Mariposa Hotel was home to fraternal organizations that served as extended families for Filipino bachelors. Later, in 1948, union leaders used the lobby as headquarters when asparagus pickers in the San Joaquin Valley struck. Many of those strike leaders would later help organize the 1965 Delano grape strike, which marked the emergence of César Chávez and the birth of the United Farm Workers.

At the Lafayette Lunch Counter, on the corner of Lafayette and El Dorado, an elderly patron was called *Manong*, a term of endearment roughly translated as "older man." There, Dawn Mabalon's grandfather, Pablo "Ambo" Mabalon, served hotcakes and a spicy chicken dish, *adobo*, but his specialty was the *dinigua*, a stew made of pork blood. For many, the restaurant also served as a post office, with patrons' mail held in an old cardboard box on the counter. Ambo Mabalon dispensed soap he made from lard and was known to give away a meal now and then because he couldn't stand to see Filipinos suffer.

LIKE MANY ETHNIC NEIGHBORHOODS in the United States, Little Manila was nearly destroyed in the 1960s and '70s by urban renewal. Where Filipinos saw home, city planners saw urban blight. Stockton's West End Redevelopment Project cleared nine blocks of Little Manila

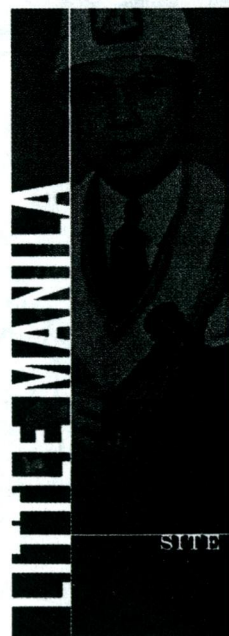
and the adjoining Chinatown in the mid-1960s, displacing residents and shutting down dozens of businesses. After that, the Crosstown Freeway cut a swath through the neighborhood. The freeway was envisioned as a way to more easily bring people into the newly revitalized downtown, which it did, but the effect of the West End Redevelopment Project was divisive: Everything north of the freeway was viewed as affluent and white, everything to the south, poor, Latino, Asian, or African American. A 10-story Filipino Plaza was built several blocks north of the old neighborhood, and many displaced residents relocated there, but the plaza could not replace a thriving community.

On that sunny afternoon in 1999 Dawn Mabalon stood witness as city council members took turns awkwardly swinging a gold-painted sledgehammer toward a bull's-eye target above the words "Demolition Kickoff." The target was mounted on the side of one of the aging residential hotels next door to her grandfather's old restaurant. On hearing that the Lafayette Lunch building was coming down, Mabalon's father, Ernesto, a man who showed few emotions, told her, "That restaurant is the place where we came from." For Mabalon, the demolition spoke to something more: the erasure of her cultural history, the loss of all the old-timers who had sacrificed everything to start a new life in America. The building was a part of herself, a personal anchor.

She and other Filipino leaders had been told that it was too late to oppose the plans, and Mabalon had to settle for recording the event on video. Later, when Stockton officials cleared out the hotels, they discovered *Manongs*, Little Manila's founders, then in their 90s, still living there.

Determined to prevent further demolition, Mabalon and a contingency of local residents showed up this summer at a city council meeting to stop Stockton from approving the Asian mall development. The deadline for proposals was put off, and the Little Manila Foundation and the Stockton chapter of the Filipino American National Historical Society were given three months to come up with a plan of their own. Mabalon's group joined forces with a San Diego developer, Urban Innovations, to draft a plan for the area that includes affordable housing and restores the Little Manila buildings as a cultural center and Filipino American National Museum. Members of the California Historic Preservation Office were invited to see whether the buildings qualified for designation as state landmarks, which would make tearing them down more difficult for developers. The Little Manila Foundation also began the process of listing the area in the National Register of Historic Places.

The Little Manila preservation effort parallels a larger movement up and down the West Coast to recognize the importance of Filipino American history. In San Francisco, plans are in the works for a Manilatown center with a per-



BOTTOM: COURTESY LITTLE MANILA FOUNDATION

formance space and a gallery, and an area in Los Angeles was recently designated Historic Filipinotown. In Seattle, home to the Filipino American National Historical Society, an international district pays tribute to Filipino history.

Though Stockton is the first city in the nation to designate a Filipino American historic site, it seems less inclined to preserve Little Manila's remaining buildings. A Stockton historian, Leslie Crow, who serves as an adviser to the city council and chair of Stockton's Cultural Heritage Board, thinks the issues surrounding the development have the potential to divide the community. Both sides would be better served, she says, by a compromise addressing "the needs of economic revitalization, redevelopment issues, cultural concerns, and historic preservation. In the final outcome, if it's structured properly, each one of those arenas will get a little of what they want."

The developer of the Asian mall, Manuel Fernandez of Oakland, has promised to include a cultural center in his plans but hesitates to preserve the three buildings, fearing that the cost will make the project untenable.

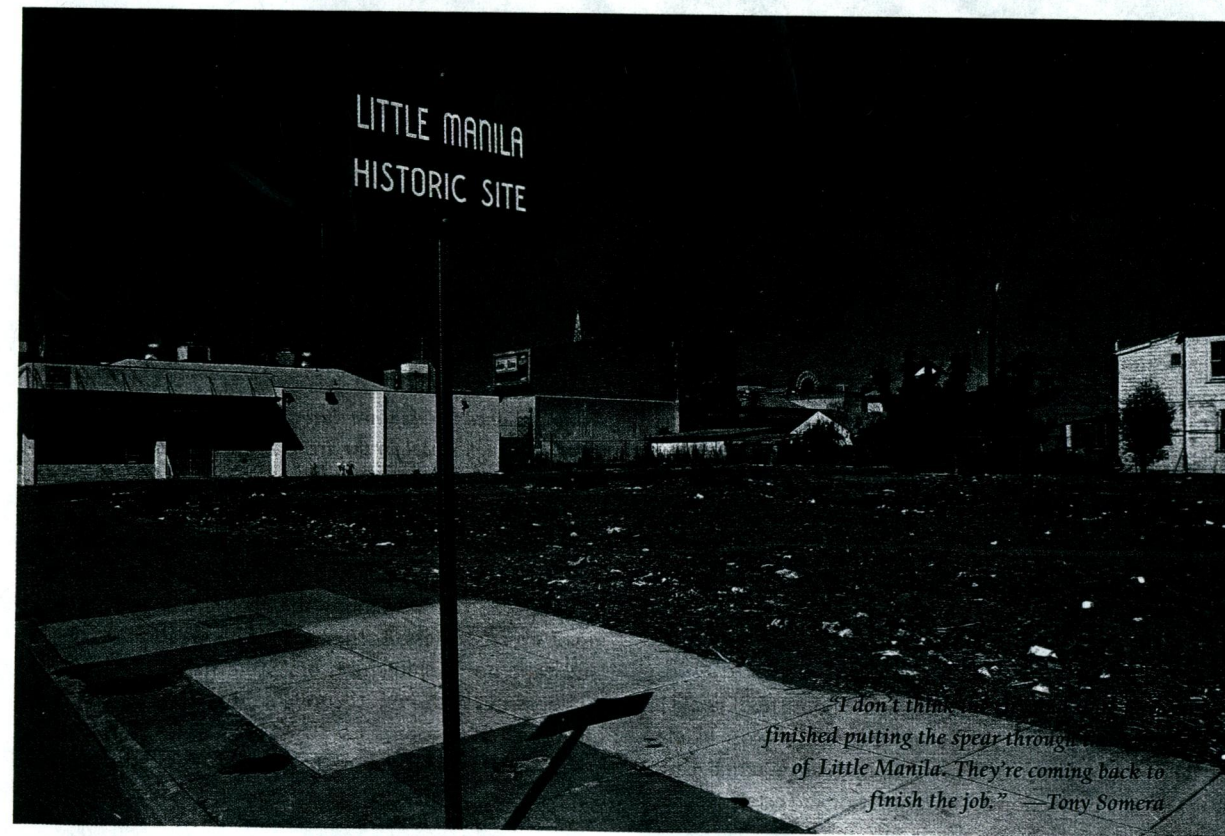
Proponents of the mall point out that it would serve the surrounding community in ways a museum could not. "Can they go to the museum for groceries? Can they go to the museum for doctors?" asks Vice Mayor Gloria Nomura, a 62-year-old Filipino American who remembers attending dances and social functions in the building that now houses the Emerald. Despite her

memories of a thriving Filipino community, she does not think the buildings are worth saving. "Little Manila is just an area we went to. We were restricted to it. Today I have the opportunity to go wherever I want to go—that's the important thing. Do these three buildings signify what I struggled through as a Filipino? I'd have to say no."

Tony Somera of the Little Manila Foundation is cynical about the city's intent. As he sees it, not much has changed in Stockton since the days when bowling alleys and restaurants barred Filipinos and redevelopment meant destroying structures. "I don't think the city and state have finished putting the spear through the heart of Little Manila," he says. "They're coming back to finish the job."

AS THE DINERS LEAVE the Emerald, the stifling summer heat has parched the grass in the vacant lots and made the asphalt bubble. The only hint of a breeze comes from semis and cars traveling the Crosstown Freeway. At the corner of Lafayette and El Dorado stands the gleaming McDonald's that replaced the Lafayette Lunch Counter. Draped from a nearby streetlight, a banner depicts Dawn Mabalon's grandfather standing outside his restaurant. For a moment it seems that he is watching his granddaughter; he is smiling.

Stephen Howie is a journalist in Bellingham, Wash., and the author of *The Bluffton Charge*. His wife, poet Maria McLeod, contributed to this story.



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