

# MEET THE MANONGS: The Untold Stories of Filipino Farmworkers

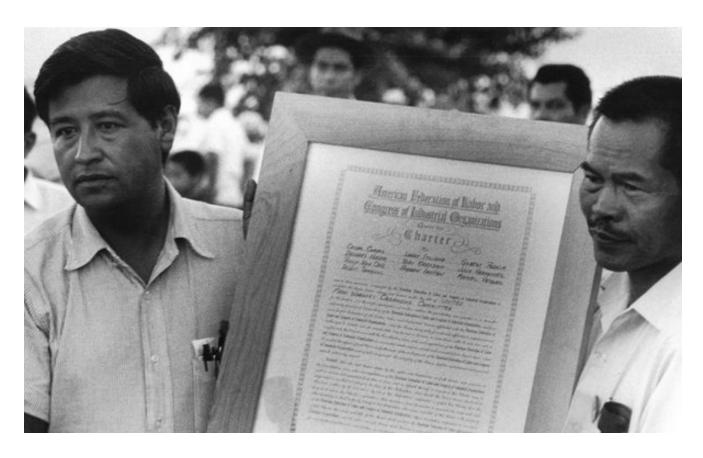


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#### WHO are THE Manongs?

Much has been written, for both adult and child audiences, about the life and legacy of César Chávez. In contrast, comparatively little exists about the lives of Filipino labor leaders who worked side by side with Chávez and other Mexican organizers. What has been recorded and written about these Filipino leaders was not created specifically for use with children. The biographies in this packet provide some basic information about four major figures in the Filipino labor movement in California.

Filipino laborers and organizers like Itliong, Vera Cruz, Imutan, and Velasco endured many hardships and were part of the *manong* generation - the first massive group of Filipino immigrants who arrived in the U.S. in the 1920s and 1930s. The last of the manongs passed away in 1997, but their legacy lives on through books and documentaries. Other notable Filipino laborers not described here are Carlos Bulosan, Chris Mensalvas, Ernesto Mangaoang, and Ben Gines; many lesser known *manongs* contributed their efforts as well.



Cesar Chavez (left) and Larry Itliong (right) hold the AFL-CIO charter for the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee in 1966. The organization was created when the mostly Mexican National Farm Workers Assocation (NFWA), led by Chavez, merged with the mostly Filipino Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC). Photo by LeRoy Chatfield.

#### coming to america

Filipinos were the earliest Asians to cross the Pacific Ocean to North America because of the Manila galleon trade between Mexico and the Philippines from 1565-1815. They first landed on what was to become the United States on October 18, 1587 in Morro Bay along the California coast. In the centuries that followed, Filipinos came to various parts of North America, from Acapulco, Mexico to Alaska. The first permanent U.S. settlement of Filipinos was in Louisiana in 1763. However, they did not immigrate to the United States in large groups until the 1900s.

In 1521, the explorer Ferdinand Magellan claimed the Philippines for Spain. Spain ruled the Philippines from the sixteenth century until the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898, when it surrendered control of the country to the United States. In the years before the war, some Filipinos began movements against Spain's colonial government to fight for Filipino independence after four centuries of Spanish control. Once the U.S. annexed the Philippines, Filipinos continued to fight against the new American colonizers and hundreds of thousands of Filipinos were killed and countrysides were destroyed. In 1899, the First Philippine Republic officially declared war against the United States; this war ended in 1902 with Filipinos given very limited self-government by the U.S. via the Philippine Organic Act.

As part of America's colonial empire, many changes occurred in the Philippines. The Philippine economy was restructured to benefit U.S. interests, the Roman Catholic Church was disestablished as the state religion, and English became the primary language of government, industry, and education. Due to their country's status as an American territory, Filipinos held U.S. passports and were able to immigrate to the United States more freely than other Asian groups. They also had the benefit of knowing English, which also set them apart from other immigrants.

Between 1903 and 1939, many young Filipinos went to the U.S. to further their education through college or other studies. During Spanish rule, college education was something that only the wealthy could attain. The opportunity to study in the U.S. was embraced by two groups: *pensionados*, whose education was partially paid by the Philippine territorial government, and students whose families could afford to pay for educational expenses themselves. Some of these students returned to the Philippines, often taking leadership and governmental positions, while others remained in the U.S.

A second group of immigrants from the Philippines traveled to Hawaii between 1907 and the 1930s, mostly to work as laborers on plantations. This group was mostly male, between the ages of 16 and 22, usually had no more than an eighth grade education, and unmarried. Many of these laborers were recruited as cheap labor; however, as the demand for labor

decreased in the 1930s, tens of thousands of immigrants returned home to the Philippines while others went to the U.S. West Coast. As the American colonial government grew, many Filipinos grew poorer, especially in the countryside where farmers did not own the land they worked on and were treated badly.

The third early wave of Filipino immigrants went directly to the West Coast in the 1920s and 1930s, often leaving behind their difficult lives in the country in search of financial opportunities. The *manongs* described in this packet are part of this last group of Filipino immigrants, which was overwhelmingly made up of young, single men.

#### THE LIFE OF a Laborer

Young Filipino immigrants worked many jobs in the United States, from dishwashers and cooks to factory and farm work. According to the 1930 Census, of the 45,200 Filipinos living in the continental U.S., about 30,400 were counted in California. The jobs most accessible to Filipinos in California were in the fields.

Growers, or farm owners, thought that Filipinos were particularly suited for "stoop labor", which requires workers to plant or weed with their bodies bent down for up to ten hours a day. This type of work was very painful and did not pay well, and growers often paid Filipinos less money than other workers. Farm laborers did not stay on one farm for long, instead moving from one region to another as different crops were ready for harvest. This type of work is called *migrant labor* since the workers are always on the move and don't stay in one place for long.

Migrant labor conditions were very bad. They had few Sundays or holidays off and had little protection from the heat and pesticides that surrounded them. Toilets and sanitary drinking water systems were rare, making it easy for workers to become ill or injured. Growers usually provided housing for the workers, often in the form of crowded bunkhouses, barns, shacks, boxcars, or tents.

Workers stayed together in labor crews. Crews were often members of the same ethnicity, and people looking for work were added to crews by friends and family members. Crews were headed by a crew boss who tried to come to fair terms about pay and working conditions with growers. Sometimes these negotiations were successful and sometimes they weren't, so it was important for farm laborers to stick together to fight for better working conditions. They created labor organizations that gave them an opportunity to work together as a group to decide what they wanted from their employers. Sometimes organizations were formed by workers of the same ethnicity while others had wide member diversity.

#### Labor organizations

America has a long history of workers who have come together to fight for better working conditions and wages. The following organizations are mentioned throughout this packet by their acronyms.

#### Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC)

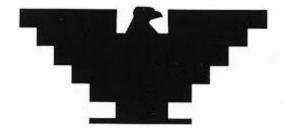
The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) was formed to organize farm workers in California. Although AWOC existed only for seven years, it called many strikes against growers and farm labor contractors and had some success in raising wages for farm laborers. AWOC worked to get job security, union recognition, and better labor conditions for its members and protested the use of illegal hiring practices by growers and contractors. Many AWOC members were Filipinos (although membership also included Chicanos, Anglos, and blacks) and Larry Itliong was a prominent AWOC leader.

#### **National Farm Workers Association (NFWA)**

The National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) was a farm workers union started by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta in 1962 to organize farm workers. Chavez built up a large Mexican membership through person-to-person recruitment and intimate house meetings. Chavez' brother Richard designed a red flag with a black Aztec eagle that became the NFWA's symbol and was later used by the United Farm Workers (UFW). NFWA supported a 1965 rose strike and joined the Delano grape strike started by AWOC before merging together to form the UFW.

#### **United Farm Workers (UFW)**

Founded in 1965, the UFW resulted from the merging of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), composed of mostly Filipino workers, and the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), with a mostly Mexican membership. Led by Cesar Chavez, the UFW was a farmworkers' union that focused on non-violent tactics. It gained national prominence in the 1970s after a successful five year grape boycott that began with the Delano grape strike and a membership of 50,000 field workers in California and Floride. In the 1980s, membership began to shrink but the UFW still exists today to support the rights of farm workers.



# BIOGRAPHIES OF FILIPINO FARMWORKERS

The first generation of Filipinos who came to California as young men between 1923 and 1934 are known as the *manongs*. *Manong* means uncle; during the time they arrived in America, few women immigrated from the Philippines and until 1948 it was illegal for Whites or Mexicans to marry Filipinos. Consequently many of the *manongs* were unmarried and lived and socialized with other male Filipino workers. They lived together in cramped labor camps, rented rooms together, and pooled resources to purchase clothing and cars.



#### Larry Itliong

Larry Itliong was born on October 25, 1913 in San Nicolas, Philippines. After completing sixth grade, he decided to come to the United States at the age of 15 hoping to continue his studies. He arrived in Seattle, Washington and was a child laborer on nearby farms before working in salmon canneries in Alaska. While stories vary, some say he lost three fingers in an Alaskan cannery accident, earning him the nickname "Seven Fingers." While he was unable to further his education through schooling, he learned about the law through hearings and spoke multiple languages.

Itliong held a variety of jobs, including laying railroad track and working on farms in Montana, South Dakota and California. In the 1930s, he was involved in a lettuce strike in Washington and later organized the salmon cannery workers union. Then Itliong became a paid organizer for various Filipino

unions. In 1959, he was put in charge of Filipino membership for the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC).

In May of 1965, AWOC held a strike against the grape growers in the Coachella Valley. The growers tried to pay the Filipino laborers less than workers from Mexico, so the Filipinos refused to work. The grapes in Coachella ripen quickly and needed to be harvested, so the growers agreed to pay a higher wage to the Filipinos. After this successful strike, AWOC decided to fight for higher wages further north in the town of Delano. On September 8th they voted to begin what is known as the Delano grape strike; however, while the Filipinos went on strike, Mexican laborers took their

place on the fields. Realizing that the strike would not be successful unless Filipinos and Mexican workers fought together, Itliong went to talk to Cesar Chavez. Chavez was the head of the mostly Mexican National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). At first, Chavez did not think his organization was ready for such a big strike. On September 16th, Chavez called a mass meeting of NFWA and the members agreed to join the strike.

In 1969, the mostly Filipino AWOC merged with the mostly Mexican NFWA to form the United Farm Workers (UFW). Itliong was put second in command behind Executive Director Cesar Chavez. By 1971, Itliong became frustrated with UFW and resigned. He felt that the UFW did not provide enough support for its Filipino members, many of whom were elderly and ready for retirement. He decided to focus his attention on this group and in 1974, the Agbayani Village retirement center opened. Named after a Filipino worker who died of a heart attack during the Delano grape strike, Agbayani Village was a place for the *manongs* -many of whom never married or started families- to spend their later years.

Itliong's work for the Filipino community continued after leaving the UFW as he assisted with other strikes and was nominated President of the Filipino American Political Association. In 1977, he died at the age of 63 of Lou Gehrig's disease. Since his death, his son Johnny has tried to share his father's story. Larry Itliong's image has been included in murals and a California middle school was renamed the Itliong - Vera Cruz Middle School after him and fellow Filipino member of AWOC and UFW Philip Vera Cruz. This school is the first in the United States to be named for Filipino Americans.



#### PHILIP Vera Cruz

Philip Vera Cruz was born on December 25, 1904 in Saoag, Philippines. He worked on farms, often supervising his family's carabao (water buffalos), before deciding to immigrate to the United States with three friends in 1926. Vera Cruz arrived in Seattle and began working various jobs along the West Coast and in the Midwest with the hope of furthering his education. He worked at a box factory, in a cafeteria as a busboy, thinning sugar beets, and at a country club. He was drafted into the army during World War II and went to Delano, CA after his release, where he returned to farm work.

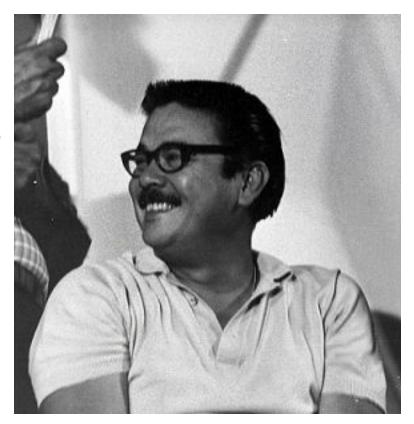
In between grape seasons in Delano, Vera Cruz traveled to work in the asparagus fields in Stockton, CA. In Stockton he participated in the first major agricultural worker strike after World War II and became active in local unions, including AWOC. He joined Larry Itliong and other Filipino workers in the Delano grape strike and became instrumental in representing the interests of Filipinos when AWOC merged with NFWA to form the United Farm Workers (UFW). He served as second vice president and on the managing board of the UFW from its inception in 1969 until 1977.

After leaving the UFW, Vera Cruz continued to work with unions and fight for social justice for the rest of his life. While in a long-term relationship, he never married or had children; for much of his early working years, he used his earnings to put his younger siblings through school but did not return to the Philippines for fifty years. He died at the age of 89 on June 12, 1994. In 2013, a California middle school was renamed the Itliong - Vera Cruz Middle School after him and fellow Filipino member of AWOC and UFW Larry Itliong. This school is the first in the United States to be named for Filipino Americans.

#### andy imutan

Andy Imutan was born on March 8, 1926 in Manila, Philippines. In the Philippines, Imutan worked as a realtor. He came to the United States with his wife in July of 1965, first arriving in Los Angeles, CA and then moving to Delano, CA. He had only worked in nearby grape fields for a short time before the Delano grape strike began.

Imutan was a frequent attendee of Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) meetings and became good friends with Larry Itliong. After AWOC merged with Cesar Chavez' National Farm Workers Association to form the United Farm Workers (UFW), Imutan became the UFW director in Stockton and Delano and helped lead boycotts outside of California.



#### Pete Velasco

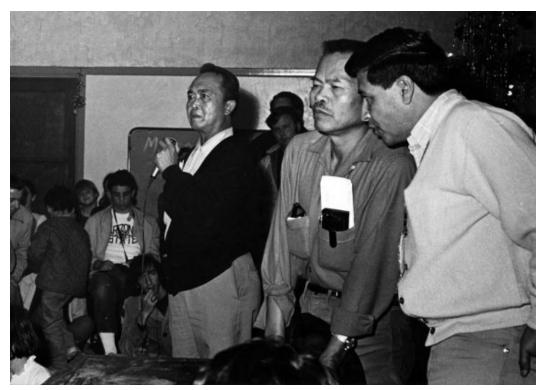
Pete Velasco was born on August 18, 1910 in Asingan, Philippines. He came to the United States in 1931 and worked a variety of restaurant jobs in Los Angeles. During World War II, he joined the military and served in Europe. After the war, he became a citizen and worked in California farms for the next twenty years.

Pete was one of the 1,500 Filipino farm workers who began the 1965 Delano grape strike. During the strike, he organized food caravans and raised money. In 1972, Velasco was assigned as field office director of the UFW in Stockton, California. He served many roles in the UFW, including boycott coordinator, board member, and was elected secretary-treasurer in 1980. Pete died on December 3, 1995.

Photo of Larry Itliong circa 1960s from the <u>Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University</u>. Photo of Philip Vera Cruz circa 1970s from the <u>Walter P. Reuther Library</u> at Wayne State University.

Photo of Andy Imutan from the <u>Farmworker Movement Documentation Project</u> at the University of California at San Diego.

Photo of Pete Velasco taken in 1978 from the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University

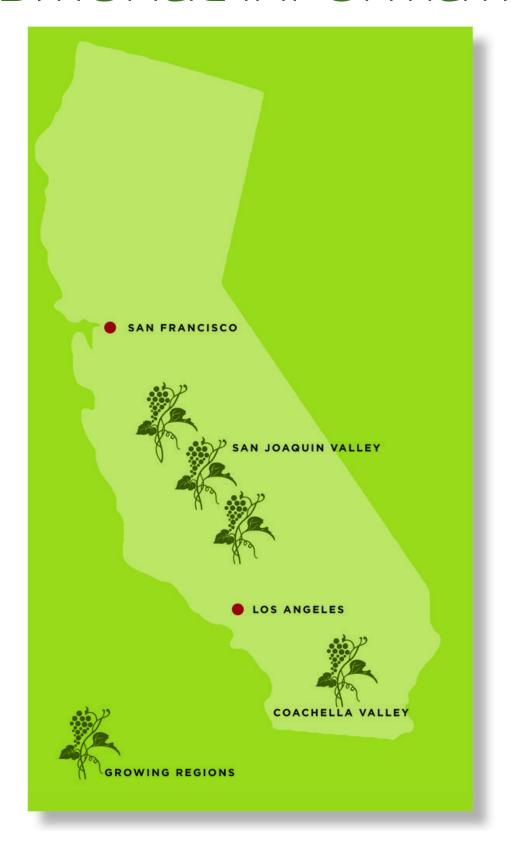


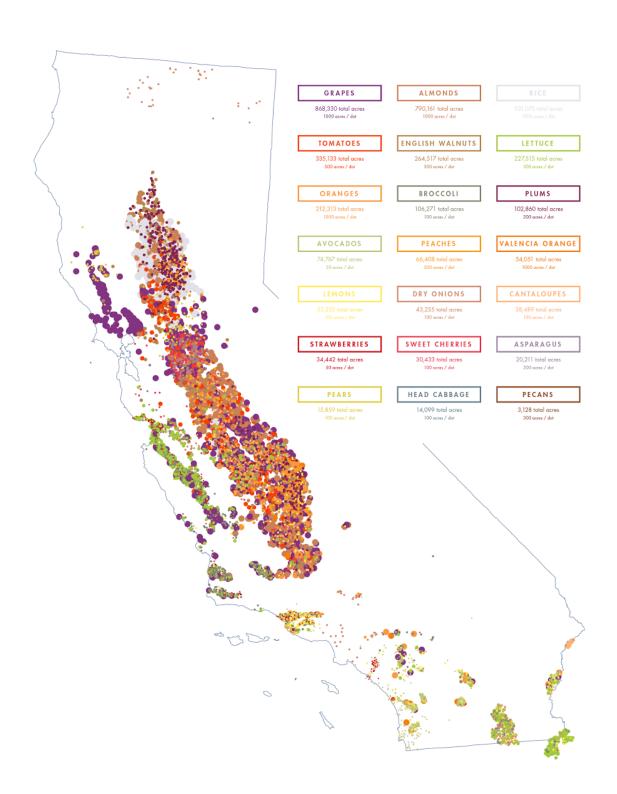
Pete Velasco, Larry Itliong, and Cesar Chavez meet at the Filipino Hall, Delano, California, Christmas, circa 1968. From the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University.



Left to right: Andy Imutan, Dolores Huerta, **Larry** Itliong, and Robert Kennedy at a rally in Delano, California before the breaking of Cesar Chavez's 25-day Fast, March 10,1968. From the United Farm Workers photo collection at the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University.

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION





## CALIFORNIA

FRUITS & VEGETABLES OF THE GOLDEN STATE

2007 USDA Census of Agriculture | Karl Sluis, June 2013

#### FUTTHER RESEARCH

New York Times article about Larry Itliong, published on October 19, 2012 <a href="http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/19/us/larry-itliong-forgotten-filipino-labor-leader.html">http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/19/us/larry-itliong-forgotten-filipino-labor-leader.html</a> Interview with Larry Itliong's son Johnny: <a href="http://vimeo.com/68026271">http://vimeo.com/68026271</a>

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