**Eva Alminiana Monroe interviewed by Christina Ayson Plank Part 1 of 2 Speakers:** Eva Alminiana Monroe and Christina Ayson Plank

**Date:** May 8, 2021

**Scope and Contents:** In this interview conducted in person, Eva Alminiana Monroe speaks with Christina Ayson Plank, a member of the Watsonville is in the Heart project team. Monroe discusses her father, Amando Ocampo Alminiana’s immigration story and the establishment of his barbershop in Watsonville called The Universal Barbershop. She also discusses her father's enlistment in the First Filipino Infantry Regiment and her mother, Rosario “Nena” Nieva Cortes Alminiana’s work as a nurse during World War II in the Philippines where they met.

Monroe recalls memories of growing up in Watsonville and the events that her mother organized in association with the Filipino Women's Club. She also discusses her uncle's work in the agricultural fields, experiences with racism, and memories of other manongs in the community.

# Christina Ayson Plank 00:00

So today is May 8th, 2021. It is 12:23pm. We are at 330 Castenada Avenue in San Francisco. My name is Christina Ayson Plank and I'm here with—if you want to state your full name.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 00:14

Eva Monroe. Or Eva—for practical purposes—Eva Alminiana Monroe.

# Christina Ayson Plank 00:20

Wonderful, thank you. And we are here to record her family history in Watsonville. So let's just get started with the bare bones. What's—where were you born? And tell me about your family background.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 00:36

Okay. So I was born in 1949, in the city of Watsonville. The Watsonville Community Hospital in Santa Cruz County, California. I am one of three children. I have an older brother Angelo, who's since passed away. And he's actually a half brother. My Mother was widowed during the war. And then remarried my Father, whom she met when he was a soldier in Manila. And when they were married, they had me and then I have a younger brother, Rene Alminiana, and he is going to be seventy this year.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 01:12

So we both grew up in Watsonville. And when I was born, my Mother and my Dad all moved me from the hospital to a new house that was built with GI funds in Watsonville. And it was

really a wonderful new beginning. So I'll step back a little bit and talk about my parents meeting, or would you want to do that in another place?

**Christina Ayson Plank** 01:42 No, let's do that here.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 01:44

Okay. So my Dad arrived in the United States in 1929. And what he did to bring him to United States was to follow his older brother, Juan Alminiana, who is the real manong in our family. So Uncle Johnny came before 1929. In the teens, I believe. He started as many of the Filipinos, specifically Ilocanos, who were recruited to work in the agricultural fields. He went first to Hawai'i, and picked pineapple, and sugar cane, and he was paid a dollar a day to do that kind of manual labor. Twelve hours a day. Was very difficult. And among the Filipinos, he was the one who said, "Okay, we've heard about this wonderful place in America called California with a lot of farming and agricultural and they need laborers." And so they actually had people who came and recruited these men to come to the United States. So my uncle came to the United States and landed in San Francisco. And from San Francisco, he probably most likely took a bus straight to Stockton where he began his life as a migrant worker in California.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 03:00

And so as a migrant worker without family here, he traveled with people that he knew—friends—to different farms up and down the state. From as far away as Delano where he picked grapes, up through the Central Coast picking apples, thinning lettuce, picking string beans, strawberries, of course, in Watsonville. And then further up into Washington where he said he picked apples. He did not go to the canneries in Alaska. And in between, he just stayed in the labor camps. And then when he asked my Father to come. My Father came in 1929, just the most wonderful time to arrive in the United States with the market crash and the Depression that followed. He came to San Francisco and took his bus up to Stockton, took one look around and said, "This is not for me."

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 03:54

So he decided he needed to get a job. And the first and only job you could find was as a dishwasher, in a restaurant. And so he stayed there for a year and learned the kitchen, every role in the kitchen. Including the cooking and moving from sous chef to finally a chef. And while he was in the restaurant, he watched very carefully the culture that he was in. So he was the back of the house, but he would come to the front of house to see who was there, what they did, how they spoke, how they acted, how they worked at a table or acted at table. So he absorbed that kind of culture there with the intent to leave the restaurant and hire himself out at

another one of the kinds of jobs that Filipinos—people of color—could take as a houseboy in Hollywood.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 04:47

So his minor claim to fame is working for Norma Shearer who is an old actress. He didn't work for her, he worked for her sister someplace in Hollywood. And it was in Hollywood that his eyes opened to a bigger life that could be had if you worked hard and you opened your eyes and saved your money. So he worked as a houseboy, but he saved his money, sent back money to the Philippines to his family, of course. He came from a family of ten children. And it was not a real rich—it was an agricultural farmer’s family in Ilocos Sur, northern Philippines. Saved his money. And in the process was able to save enough money to next buy his first business, which was another business open to Filipinos at the time, which was a pool hall.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 05:37

So he had the pool hall. He was still working as a house boy. And then at one point, he heard from friends in Los Angeles that there was a barbershop that was available to buy—to purchase—in the little city of Watsonville, in the Pajaro Valley. So he came up and checked it out and decided to buy it. So closed up shop in Los Angeles, packed up his few belongings and bought the barbershop, which had a room in the back where he could live. So there were, I think, five or six chairs there—there were a good number of chairs in that barbershop—and he worked six days a week. Sunday was for playing tennis. And maybe he went to church. I don't know. That's what he told my Mom when he was courting her, "Yes, I go to church."

**Christina Ayson Plank** 06:28 [laughs]

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 06:30

So he spent—this was the purchase of this business, the barbershop, was in the '30s, About the mid '30s. And so he worked away and became part of the community in Watsonville. Of which—and the barbershop was located on lower Main, where most of these people of color, Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese, this is where all their businesses were. There was no place past about Second Avenue—Second Street, that you can find any Filipino businesses. Actually, after the war, there were a couple of barbershops that were established north of Second Street, I believe it was. But the gist of the businesses like The Tabasa's Oriental Cafe, Ben Ragsac's Ideal Cleaners, my Dad's barbershop—and then subsequently one or two other barbershops; from barbers who worked for him opening up their own businesses. And then there were the labor camps, of course. The labor camps were managed by Filipinos. So business wise, in Watsonville, there was not a lot to be had. Just those things that I just mentioned.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 07:36

So he worked and worked away. And there were no real organizations to join at that point. Except for the . . . what were they called? They were fraternal organizations.

**Christina Ayson Plank** 07:51 The lodges?

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 07:52

The lodges, yeah. And the lodges were social. And a lot of their socialness revolved around the cockfights. So my Father, being a true Ilocano—and most of them are Ilocano—my Father was specifically a very kuripot.

**Christina Ayson Plank** 08:06 Uhm-hm. [laughs]

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 08:06

Like this, this [kuripot] means "tight." So he didn't gamble, he just saved his money and kept socking it away. And then the war broke out. As we know, after World War Two and the invasion of the Japanese at Pearl Harbor, they were ready to just grab any guy who wore a pair of pants and had two legs. And so my Father signed up at Fort Ord, and he actually became part of the original First and Second Regiment of all Filipino troops that were going to be sent to the Philippines. And that's how he got to the Philippines. So he—I think he got to the Philippines in 1942, '43 when the war broke out. No, I take that—roll that back. Because he was trained to become one of General MacArthur's repatriation forces. So the repatriation forces were the troops that went in after the Japanese were moved out of whatever they were occupying. And the troops would set up the education system, the city governance, hospitals, and schools. That's what they did. And so that's what he was going to be doing when he got there.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 09:24

I'll take you on an aside. When he went to San Francisco, where the troops were more, I think—what is the word? There's a specific military word for the gathering of these troops and divided them into sections to where they were going off. He met his two best friends, Paul Nippon-Seno and Pete Laconsay, and these people were to remain in our lives until they passed away. So these three guys got on their troop ship and started steaming out towards Guam as the first text destination and then to the Philippines to do what needed to be done. They had to sort of stay back because they had to wait until parts of the Philippines were

liberated and then they could move their ships forward and go into Manila Bay and then be dispersed to the areas where they were going to be assigned.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 10:16

But as far as the war is concerned, my Father never really spoke about the war. Until my youngest—my oldest son had a school assignment. And he was no more than about eight years old, eight or ten years old, and he had to talk to a relative about if they went to the war, what was their experience? My Father proceeded to tell him about going to San Francisco, getting on a ship, going out on the ocean, and they were fair targets for the Japanese. And at one point, he and Paul and Pete and Paul's brother were on the top of the ship—they were topside. And the sirens said, "The planes were coming." And they literally had to dive for cover before the bombs and the bullets just obliterated everything. My Father and his two friends were able to dive down the metal staircase to the next level down. And Paul's brother was caught up top by the gun turrets. And my Father told my son who was eight, "Oh yes, you could hear all this bombing and screaming and the water from the top of the boat was coming down the ladders. And it was full of blood from the people who were up there." Like I couldn't believe he was telling my son this. But it was the only story that he ever told. And he said they went up after the "all clear" sign went up and there was no sign of anybody. Paul's brother was gone. And the amazing thing was, Paul's brother was a student at the University of San Francisco. So, one good Filipino man just wiped out.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 11:59

So they get to the Philippines. And my Father is assigned to Corregidor. And he's assigned to Corregidor as a medic. He attained the position of Sergeant First Class with a medic specialty. So he was sent to Corregidor. I don't know why they did that? Maybe because he was a barber and you know how barbers in the Middle Ages did doctoring?I don't know, just a crazy thought.

**Christina Ayson Plank** 12:22 [laughs]

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 12:23

But he was assigned to Corregidor to a particular clinic. And it was at the clinic that he met my Mom. So, backwards to my Mom: My Mother was born and raised in the province of Quezon in the city of Lucena. But she went to the University in Manila. I don't know if it was Santo Tomas or the Philippine University. And she was studying for a four year degree in nursing. And at that time, she met my older brother's father, who was a medical student. They were college sweethearts and they were both writers. My Mother wrote for her college yearbook and he wrote, he wrote poetry and lots of different essays. I never did see his poetry. So they married, the war broke out, they had one son, my older brother, Angelo. So my Mother was nursing my

brother. She wasn't working as a nurse because she had just had the baby. And Angelo's father was out in the field, he'd set up a field hospital. And he was—he died, trying to bring patients into his hospital. The Japanese would just mow anybody down who moved and there were people who needed help, and that was his job. And so he was just taken down in action. So my Mother's a widow, she's in the Philippines. She's gone back to work. And she goes to her clinic to see the new troops that'd come in. And there they are. My Father and some of his men were having a job. I think she said he was rolling bandages or something. And she comes in and she's got her starched cap, her uniform, her hat, her chart, and she looks up to see who the new guys are. And my Father looks up and sees her and says, "Oh my god, who's that?" And my Mother looks over and sees him looking at her and she said, "Oh my God, who is that?!"

**Christina Ayson Plank** 14:22 [laughs]

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 14:24

Well, it being the war and the the GIs having things that the poor Filipinos were in such dire need of. I mean, he gave his rations to her. He wooed her with the movies at the camps and fell in love with my brother, Angelo, brought him lots of food because it was a hard time in Manila. In fact, when my Mother was newly widowed, she said "I would hold Angelo in my arms and it was blackout time." She would be standing in her doorway looking up at the night sky. She could see the planes coming in and there was no food. And her pediatrician said, "Nena, as long as you can, breastfeed Angelo because that's the best nutrition he's ever going to have until we can get more supplies in.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 15:13

So, unimaginable hard times that our parents went through. Well, the long and the short of it was, my Father asked to marry her. He was actually marrying way up and my Mother was marrying down. [laughs] Her father was the governor of Tayabas province in Quezon province. And before that he was the mayor of their town. So he went from mayor to the governor. And was only doing that for only about two years and then moved back into private life. And my Mother was the one who followed my Father—or my grandfather around—to all the social things and the speaker's meetings and council meetings, because she was serving as his hostess. My Mother—my grandmother didn't want to have anything to do with that. She had nine kids to raise and a whole house full of help that she needed to tell what to do. So my Mother loved this kind of stuff. She was the first girl after four boys. And nothing deterred her. So that's kind of her background. She—they were pretty comfortable before the war. And then the war took everything away.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 16:27

And my Father came along and offered her a new life, and a new love in California. And she said, "I'm going, I want to do this. I'm not going to get anywhere in the Philippines, especially during the war." So he went back to the United States and my Mother stayed. And they courted over the mail. And at one point she said, "Well, you've told me all about yourself, but I really don't know second or third hand about you from anybody else. What is the name of your parish priest in Watsonville? I'm going to write him a letter and find out more about you." [laughs] And so, my Father went to talk to the parish priest and got the information, address and sent it to my Mother. My Mother went ahead and wrote letters of inquiry about my Father. "Is his business legit?" "Does he go to church?" "Does he gamble?" "Is he a good man?" [laughs] Apparently, the reports that came back were good, because she said, "Okay, I'll marry. You sound like a very good man. And I do love you." So he went back, they married in Lucena.

They came back on a steamer with my brother and came back to Watsonville. And they lived in back of the barbershop. Which is where, if you had a business, it was a ready made place.

Now Ben Ragsac who owned Ideal Cleaners—and I'm hoping you'll be able to do an interview with Ben—when he married, he and his wife lived behind the the cleaners until they could build their house. So they're living in the back of the barbershop.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 18:04

My Mother is probably in culture shock. Because it's a little town, no friends, and she wants to build a life. So they find that they move into the house on Bridge Street and my Mother's life starts to come together. And what she wants to do, actually, is organize the women—the wives—who have nothing to do in Watsonville and form a community with them by way of organizations like a Woman's Club, for one, and a Community Woman's Club where both men and women could attend programs and create programs so that they could educate the people of Watsonville about the Filipino culture. That was her big deal. She was not about to to live someplace where the Filipinos were considered laborers. I mean, they had a life, they had a culture, they had education. And she wanted to make sure that the town where we lived was going to be able to provide some social equity for everybody who was living there. So that's what she did. And the way she did that was to go to the current president of the Watsonville Women's Club. And this was Opal Marshall. Dr. Marshall was a much beloved doctor in Watsonville. He was a doctor until he was in his eighties. I mean, these doctors were—they were doctors until they were in eighties or nineties. And everybody knew them. So Opal said, "I would be really happy to help you do this, Nina." They were really good hearted about it. So my Mother basically learned at her feet, how to put together an organization, how to write a charter and bylaws. And then with that information, and with Opal's support, and the growing recognition that there were these Filipina women who wanted to do this—she got her friends together, and they organized the First Filipino Woman's Club in actually the United States.

There was no other one.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 20:01

And the purpose of the club was to have community, to provide education, and camaraderie for a culture that was pretty much alone in Watsonville. Although, I have to say, Watsonville as a community was very diverse. It was a farming community that was made up of a lot of Croatians—at the time they were called Slovenians. Portuguese farmers, Japanese at the time were laborers and shopkeepers, Filipinos and Mexicans. Of course, we had the usual: the Irish, the Italian, and everybody else. So it was a very diversified town. But still, broken up into little silos of their own culture.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 20:49

So growing up, everybody in a family was part of your mother's organizations. And one of the things they wanted the children to do was to maintain some cultural ties. So they had a woman come from either Salinas or San Francisco teach us all the Filipino dances. So the tinikling, the ilaw ilaw, the handkerchief dance, the hat dance, the coconut dance. We learned all these dances growing up. And what we did was my Mother would have programs at the Veterans Hall and they would have a general meeting. And then they would have the program and they were usually at night so that all the people who were working could come to the programs. And we would be wearing authentic Filipino clothing; some of which we had at the exhibit at the Watsonville Public Library. So they would—my Mom and some of her friends—would go right to the Philippines and say, "Please send us terno material, pineapple fiber." So this was when the pineapple fiber was still really fine. It was really good stuff. And then the material would come here and my Mother had a relative in San Francisco, who was a seamstress, and she would sew up all my things. And she would not just sew. I mean, it was couture sewing, she would embroider and put beads and pale little, little—those little round shiny things on these things. And they were incredible, really beautiful. And that's what we danced in. And we had a good time because all the kids were together in the Filipino community. The Ragsacs, Tabasas, Galimbas, the nieces and nephews of the Ramirezes and the barbers, my parents, the Sulays, and the Robles, the Nobles, the Lopezes—we all did this together. So to this day, a lot of us have connected on Facebook and that's our touchstone, is what we did growing up together.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 22:53

I unfortunately—or fortunately—because my Father was very tight, he was going to have a house and his kids were all going to go to a good school. And I ended up going to Notre Dame, which was the parochial school and I was the only Filipino girl at Notre Dame the eight years that I was there. Though we had some Latino kids. But it was me and the Latino—a couple of Latino kid—and everybody else was white. And so I didn't go to school with all the kids. I didn't maintain other kinds of ties. But we still had the cultural ties and which, as I look back, was

really a mainstay for my life as a Filipino in an American town. So I went to Notre Dame grammar school, my older brother went to Notre Dame. All three of my—both of us—all the siblings went to Notre Dame. I went two years to the Catholic high school, to Mora High School. And then I transferred to Watsonville High School because we just thought it would be just a bigger life going to a bigger school. And we had tons of friends when we were growing up. And one of their friends was the Tagami family. So Frederick Ray, I forget the daughter's name, and Jeff Tagami, who is a writer—unfortunately passed away too soon. And is part of the whole contingency of Filipino writers from the Central Coast.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 24:27

The Filipinos—just as a hindsight—seemed to be a culture that is very much in touch with their emotions and their culture. And I know from my Mother's example, writing was really big. And it bled over into songwriting from a lot of people in the Philippines. Acting, very creative, very vocal, very warm, and generous people which translated to a community that loved—[laughs] what can I say, socialness! Dances and programs and parties. I'll segue into parties just briefly. There was always a party going on. Every weekend there was something. And one of the annual big parties that we had through the Filipino community—and all the organizations I think were invited to come to this—was the annual party at Bolado Park in Hollister. So we would go and, of course, there was a pig that was going to be roasted and a goat that was roasted. In there, the women would bring all the potluck. And we'd be playing baseball and eating watermelon and swimming. It was really the all-American experience for our culture at Bolado Park and we looked forward to it every year. The other big thing that the organizations did was to participate in the annual Fourth of July parade in Watsonville. So Santa Cruz County was the seat for the big parade. And we would have marching bands and units come down from all over the Bay Area. And a real memorable marching band was the St. Mary's Chinese Marching Band from San Francisco. With all the bells and whistles and the Chinese uniforms and everything, it was really great. And we had numerous floats and the Filipinos usually entered one or two floats that we would decorate for like two nights in a row prior to the parade. And usually in the evening—at night, because he wanted to keep the flowers fresh.

And those were always so much fun. I mean, the kids were there, the parents were there. We

would be making little crepe paper flowers or stringing carnations together to put together on the float.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 26:45

And then every year different kids, from the little kids to the middle kids to the teenagers and the young ladies and young men, would sit on the floats. And that was fun. And so I did that for several years. And I have pictures of us sitting on the float, all dolled up waving to the crowd.

And then there were also decorated cars—several cars—that the Filipino women would wear full dress regalia and the men in their Barong Tagalogs, sitting in the car decorated with all the

crepe paper and the flowers and the big signs saying what part of the organizations that they were. So I always thought that was really pretty, pretty neat. And something really special that we did and I don't know what they do like that anymore. Certainly not in San Francisco. We don't have—we don't have those kinds of occasions other than the Chinese New Year parade. That's always really neat—and the Irish parade and the Italian parade—but we never had a Filipino parade. Now in the South of Market, where we have a big Filipino community, I know that they have big festivals and things. But no parades. So okay, what else can I cover for you?

# Christina Ayson Plank 28:04

Yeah, so, I guess if you could walk me through what it was like in your father's barbershop? Day to day, even, if you want to talk about that?

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 28:15

Okay. Well, I can see his barbershop just plain as day. It was probably about—the barbershop itself—was probably twenty feet by about fourteen feet. And it had the sinks where you could tilt your head back and get your hair washed. And they put the hot towels on you to do the hot shaves. And the chairs were really beautiful. I think Roy Recio is trying to get one to display at the exhibit that we're going to have in October at the Manila International Hotel. But they were fully upholstered with the neck rests, the foot rests. Then as you walked in, to the left, was a big, brass cash register. It was all brass with a marble top and all the businesses had those things. These brass cash registers. And I think [laughs] haircuts were—I think might—when they first started, like fifty cents. As I remember the last time that I looked at the books, I think they were $1.50 for a haircut, $2 for a haircut and a shave. He also had baths in the back and you could do a steam and you could do a full bath. I remember seeing the stack tiles that he would dispense, either for the barbershop or for the baths. They were all done up at the Chinese laundry which was next door, these blue wrap packages with a little brown string.

Sometimes I would help bring those into the back and stack them up.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 29:56

But the barbershop was absolutely a social hub. There was always somebody in the barbershop and it was a mixed clientele. There were a lot of Caucasian people who came to my Father and a lot of Filipinos, Mexicans. I think there was—and then it was kind of a cultural thing too. The Japanese had their own barbershops. And, given that we were involved with the Japanese in the war, the Japanese kind of did their thing and the Filipinos did their own. I don't think my Father had many, if any, Japanese clientele come through his barbershop. But you know, he had the chairs with the little tables in between the chairs that had stacks of Life magazine, and, Look, and probably Playboy. I don't know, I don't remember seeing any of those. But just Reader's Digest, just lots of reading material and a lot of the Filipino newspapers. So they came to the barbershop to talk, to gossip, to find out what's going on.

Where was the next cockfight, where was the next pig roast, what was going on in the labor camps? What was going on with the next migrant crop that was coming? Who were the new Filipinos in town? So new Filipinos came in, went to the Oriental restaurant where Auntie Rosing was really good about directing the Filipinos to social services. You know, where to go to the doctor hospitals, how to navigate Social Security. The kinds of things that, as the Philippine Women's Club came together, were able to provide for all the new immigrants that came in. But my Father had the first chair. And he was the official greeter. And the—he also had a friend, Johnny Regalos. So Johnny was kind of like the ladies man. And these Filipino guys, when they weren't in the fields, you know, were dressed to the nines. Johnny Regalos would come in his high water pants and his suspenders and his silk shirts and his guitar, and he would sing in the barbershop. So it was a little bit of social, with music going on, and sometimes they'd sing. Or sometimes they'd just sit quietly and he would just play his guitar. I just remember that as being really cool. I had pictures of my Dad and his friends doing the "Asian Squat", you know, where they just get down on their haunches in front of the barbershop. And my youngest son, Chris, and his friends do the hot—who are Asian or Filipino, when they take a picture, they get down into the squat.

**Christina Ayson Plank** 32:30 [laughs]

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 32:32

It's funny. But my Father worked that barbershop from like, eight in the morning till eight at night. Pretty much twelve hours. And he would bring a lunch. He would bring a baon that my Mother would pack for him and he would heat it up in the back because he had a little kitchen in the back too. And when, during the school—during when I wasn't in school, I could ride my bike from our house, which was probably about eight to ten blocks away, right up Bridge Street and bring my Father his baon and then just kind of hang out in the barbershop listening to what everybody had to say. And then I would hang out because all the manongs who were in there had no children. And so, if a child would show up: oh they'd dig out the candy out of their pockets, they'd give you quarters and fifty cents and if they're feeling really lush, a dollar So I got to know a lot of these wonderful old men, and from the barbershop.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 33:29

Good barbershop story: my older brother was a really good athlete and he played baseball and he was on the pony league. They won the Bay Area championships and they were going to Bakersfield for the National. For their, I don't know, not National but California, Southern California, for their league. And my brother was at bat. My father could never go to the games because he was working. And the announcer for all the games was Willie—was it Willie or Jerry Osmer? One of the Osmer guys. Jerry Osmer—I think it was Jerry Osmer. He was also

the chief of police and during his off times he would announce the games. And so here was the big championship game in Bakersfield. And it was typical baseball drama. Bottom of the ninth, runners on base, my brother was up at bat. So Jerry Osmer says to my Dad, he's on the radio—everybody's listening to the radio because every barbershop had a radio, to listen to all the news. So they're all hanging on the radio. And Mr. Osmer says, "Okay, Armando, this is for you. Angelo is up at bat. I'm going to call the count." So it was like, "strike, strike, ball, ball, ball." Three balls, two strikes. Last pitch, my brother cracks the ball out into the way yonder.

The barbershop's going crazy, Jerry Osmer is going crazy on radio. And it was this communication. It was like Facebook without the pictures. So my brother brought home the base, the bass—the runners and they won. And they came back. Watsonville has a little airport, and somebody had these little airplanes and the boys flew in the little airplanes back into Watsonville. And the families were all out at the airfield as the boys came out of the fields. It was just all celebration. That was pretty amazing. But the beauty of it was, my Father couldn't be there, but his friend brought him to the game through the social awareness of barbershop camaraderie.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 35:40

And my Father knew these people too because he was the only Filipino in the VFW, Veterans of Foreign Wars. My Father did this because he was a businessman. He figured, "This is good for business. I need to get out there in the community and mix it up with the Caucasians." And it was something that a lot of Filipinos just didn't do. Except for his two best friends in Watsonville, Etekio Ramirez who was married to Connie Ramirez. They were the godparents to my brother, Renee. They owned one of the labor camps. And then another owner of the labor camps was Frank Barbara. And Frank and Teddy were my godparents. And they were the ones that hosted a lot of the social things that have been going on. The pig roast, the parties, the dinners. And then the other labor organizer was Mr. Sulay, Juanita's husband. But Mr. Sulay and his group were all in the lodges and they did their thing. And they did a whole cockfight rings. So my Father didn't see a lot of those people. He saw a lot of the other people who were either manongs in the field, for instance, my Uncle or the business people. And so there were like, different sections of, I don't know, socialness in Watsonville. But for the big things, everybody all came together. Especially because of the women. They all belonged to the clubs. So let's see, I went from the barbershop to the baseball games. But so my Father had that barbershop for years, he retired out of that barbershop, but he also bought another barbershop in Santa Cruz. So he went back and forth.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 37:24

That was his big business, entrepreneurship: his little barbershops. But it was enough to send us all to school, to pay for our educations, to give us help with our down payments for our houses. But [laughs] when Mike asked me to marry him—my husband—I was finished at USF

and I had a MasterCard, some credit card that had some debt on it, like $500. I had the bill and I showed it to Mike. And he said, "Oh, well, it's under your name and your father's name. So this is your father's." And he brought the bill to my dad and said, "Oh, Dad, here's Eva's MasterCard bill." And he goes, "Oh, no. You married her, it's your it's your bill now."

**Christina Ayson Plank** 38:13 [laughs] That's great.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 38:16

Yeah. So, uhm, what else can I tell you?

# Christina Ayson Plank 38:21

What—did your father ever talk about what it was like interacting with that Caucasian business association? Like what it was like working with those folks and his interactions with them?

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 38:39

For sure there was discrimination. And it was what I think what what we would call today "microaggression," micro-aggressive discrimination. And it's just the language people spoke about the "little brown brothers" or mispronouncing kinds of things and making assumptions about what you could do and didn't do or your socioeconomic status. Case in point, at the VFW my Father knew all the men, but his best friend was the plumber, Joe Borrego. And I thought it was awful brave of him to do that. But he would go to city council meetings, he knew who the city council people were, he knew the mayor, he knew the chief police—partway because they came to get their hair cut there. And he was always really friendly with them. And then at church, too. We would see a lot of the parishioners, either at St. Patrick's or at Assumption, where we finally ended up calling that our full parish. He was a member of the Father's club at the parish. I think he and Ben Ragsac and maybe Tek Ramirez were the only ones who were members of that. And I think it was because they had a certain sense of confidence in interacting with the Caucasians that they felt this certain amount of footing that they could take with them. Much more difficult with the manongs because a lot of them had broken English, they had no business skills. But they were friendly, and they were social. So they just—they just did their own thing.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 40:19

But both my parents really made an effort to interact with the Caucasian community. And my Mother when she was in these organizations, as president or vice president or whatever officers offered—whatever position she held on the executive board, would approach the newspaper for them to do stories on what the Filipinos were doing. She would invite them to the programs that were being held as guests so they could meet people. Filipinos could meet

them and they could meet the Filipinos. So she was very proactive in that regard, and my Father too. But I know there were a few times, especially when he was trying to buy real estate and things like that, where things didn't go as planned. And he—there was a there was some bitterness there. And we, you know, growing up when we did in the '50s, my parents took us to Lake Tahoe, to Disneyland, to Los Angeles. To see the sights, to the missions. Oh my god, we went to all the missions in California. But I remember being a little girl and my Father had made reservations at Lake Tahoe to stay at a cabin. And we got there and they took one look at us and said, "No, there's no reservation here." So my Father spent two hours in the dark trying to find a place for us to stay. That was the experience in the '50s. Got a little better in the '60s, but there was still discrimination.

# Christina Ayson Plank 41:54

Did he ever talk about his brother's experience working in the fields? And if he experienced anything there in terms of discriminatory acts or anything like that?

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 42:11

Well, the guys—the camps that my Father, my uncle worked for the Filipino owned camps. But they were camps that went to white owned, Caucasian owned farms. And the biggest thing that I knew about the farms was that each of the cultures work together. There was a Japanese crew, there was a Mexican crew, and there was the Filipino crew. And as far as the pecking order goes, I think the Filipino crews were the bottom of the pecking order. Japanese were there first. And then the Mexicans—I think that Mexicans and Filipinos may have come at the same time—I'm not clear on that. But there were a lot of Mexican women that the Filipino men actually married because of the misogyny laws they could not marry anybody. Until after the war, then the gates kind of opened up. But for the manongs who were there from the '20s who were already old, that was it. So as far as discrimination in the fields, that's the most that I know, I don't know if there was any verbal microaggression or anything like that. But from what I understand, most of the managers, the field managers—if they weren't Filipino, if they're white—tried to be as good as they could. Because they were getting cheap labor and good labor. These guys worked twelve hours a day. Showed up again the next morning. It was horrible work. Back breaking work.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 43:51

My Uncle would come home every night and he had a little routine. The first thing he would do was sit on this little bench that he made on the side of the garage and get out his jug of Gallo wine, his basi. Take the edge off the day and then get his tools and the sharpeners and clean his tools and sharpen the blades of his short handle hoe to be all ready for the next day. And we had a little Japanese store across the street. We were spoiled rotten as kids because when

we would go across the street with Uncle and get sodas and candy and cakes and cookies. It's amazing I have any teeth left. [laughs]

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 44:36

But life was good because, for the holidays and a lot of Sunday dinners, our doors were open to a lot of the manongs so that they would have a family place to come and eat dinner. A hot meal. A couch to sit on. Other people to socialize with. My Father would be at the barbecue in the backyard. The chef of the Deer Park Tavern in Santa Cruz County, which was the big restaurant, was Filipino. Benny and he and my Dad were tight as ticks. And so my Father did the whole trade thing. He knew all the people who were working in the field. So he would get like, boxed half crates of strawberries, baskets, lettuce, bushels of beans. And he'd trade these things all around. He'd bring them up to Benny and Benny would give him the bones that it would cut off the prime rib. And my Dad would take those bones that still had a ton of meat on them. He'd marinate them then he'd throw them on the barbecue. I miss those things. And we would have these big barbecues. All the men would come. And they were sweet, sweet guys. I remember sitting on their laps as the youngest—two or three years old.

# Christina Ayson Plank 45:43

Did your family feel like a sense of responsibility to take care of the manongs?

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 45:49

Yeah. Yeah, because they had nobody. And you know, the Filipino culture is all about family. So these men, they specialize in certain things. There was one guy who was called "manghihilot," which means the brother massager. So when you had a sprained ankle or bad back, whatever, Gene Roberonta would come to your house and he would do his thing and massage. He had special ornaments and ointments and things that he'd use on you and he'd wrap you up. I sprained my ankle a lot when I was a kid. I just ran around too hard. [laughs] But Gene would always come and he'd look at me like, "Another sprained ankle iba? What is the matter with you?" "I don't know Uncle Gene, I just like to play." And so Gene actually married a Caucasian woman and had a wonderful family. They had two girls, I think my brother dated one of their girls. But he was a longtime manong in Watsonville. He's in some of the pictures that a lot—yeah, he's in pictures that Juanita put together in her book. Which is amazing: her books are amazing.

# Christina Ayson Plank 47:04

Yeah, she graciously handed them over to me to take a look at and I was floored by the work that she's done.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 47:13

She loves it. I could never do that.

# Christina Ayson Plank 47:15

She's a historian through and through. It's really special to see them. And you could just tell, like, the care that she put into making those things.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 47:25

Well it came from the love that she had for those uncles which is really beautiful. I remember—she knew a lot, we knew a lot of the same uncles. She told me that there would be some guys that she couldn't remember. She said, "There was this one of them, I could only call 'Uncle Green Eyes' because I couldn't remember his name." But I know who that guy is. I could pick him out in the picture, but I can't remember his name either. But there were—they would come and as a child I would say terrible things. There was one guy who was really dark, Benny Rivera, and he was this big guy. He'd come to the house and he'd be dressed in his little khaki suit, his white—I'm very visual and I have a visual memory—he'd always have a white shirt, wing tipped shoes, in his little red or green bow tie. And he loved for me to read to him.

So I would sit on his lap, but I didn't know how to read yet. I just memorized the pictures because my Mother read to me constantly. And so he'd say, "Just read me anything." I say, "Okay." So I'd open the book to a story and I'd start reading. And he'd say, "You're only two and a half or three years old. How can you read this?" I say, "I don't know, Uncle. It's just easy!" "How do you read this, iba?." Then I would just read. Benny Rivera. These guys are really special. There was another man, little guy named Manong Bolos. And he had a big mole. I don't—moles are a sign of something in the Philippines—actually, they're a sign of good luck.

And they were always kind of scary. And the thing about moles was, if you had hairs growing out of them, it was even more luck. So it was just kind of gross.

**Christina Ayson Plank** 47:39 [laughs]

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 47:50

But we saw them all, all these wonderful, wonderful men.

# Christina Ayson Plank 49:17

Right. My mom has a very large mole on the side of her nose. I remember when I was young asking her like, "Why don't you just get that taken off." She was like, "Then I'll lose my lucky charm" is what she said to me. [laughs]

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 49:33

One of my cousin's came from the Philippines. And he came with one of those big moles and it had hairs coming out of it. My older brother married a Caucasian woman and she just used to say, "Why does he have that?" And we would plot getting—we would plot say, "Okay, we'll give him a lot of wine and then we'll take him out in the orchard—" because our second house we moved to had a big orchard—"take him out into the orchard and we'd shave a little hairs off his mole." But we never did it.

**Christina Ayson Plank** 50:01 [laughs]

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 50:01

My parents would have killed us. That's a good segue, talking about the cousins that came. So my Mother was the first in her family to come to the United States. And so subsequently, she started petitioning for people to come. I have the paperwork that was signed. And slowly, my cousins, and then the aunts, and the uncles, parents came until she had like four or five brothers and sisters here. But they all came through Watsonville. They all lived with us before they found their forever home or job, or whatever it is. And my Mother would kind of clue them in on where to shop, what to do, what to expect. How to interact, what were the services that were available. Just like Auntie was doing in the clubs. So many of the immigrants came without knowing all of this. I mean the second wave of immigrants that came in the '70s, which is when my family started coming, were all educated. But not totally in the American ways. So the sad thing is, many of them came as nurses, accountants, and whatever. They started working in the canneries, in the fields, doing house housework, or if they were doctors, working in a hospital as aides and nurses. Until they could get, you know, the right paperwork completed for their particular professions. And then they can move on. But so I saw most of my cousins come through here and, with my Mother being the first generation, there are now four generations of us in Watsonville. And close to a hundred family that could show up for a Filipino Christmas. But we stopped doing that. Just because when other families entered it just got too big.

# Christina Ayson Plank 51:53

So, it sounds like your mother maintained a lot of ties with the Philippines when she came to the US with your father.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 52:03

Because she still had relatives there, yeah. She still had—rather, she had brothers and sisters who chose not to come to America because they had a pretty good life in the Philippines. But most of her—all of her brothers and sisters had family who came here and settled in the United States. But yeah, that was about the extent of her ties. School friends, she had school friends

and friends that she grew up with and I would—there was her best friend, Carmelita, was a talker. You know a Filipino who is not a talker? I don't. I would ask Carmelita all kinds of questions. "So where did you go to school? What did you do? What did you play?" And I asked my Mother that same questions because I was really curious, "What did you eat? Where was your school?" She came from the kind of family where, when she would go to school as a little girl, she didn't walk. Somebody, some of the workers would carry her, carry her lunch, carry her books with an umbrella so my Mother wouldn't get too dark. And pick her up at lunch. And they would feed her lunch and they would bring her back. And my Mother had her yaya until she got married. And she was my older brother's yaya until the war when she died. So those Filipino kinds of things stayed. Okay—so you can include this or not—but you know when the Filipinos use the restroom and they have that little tin cup, the tabo?

**Christina Ayson Plank** 53:38 Uhm-hm.

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 53:39

I could never figure that out. My Mother's house they had the bidets and they had the tabo at the same time. I still haven't worked up the courage to ask them, "how do you use it?" You know? "How do you—how do you get the water from here to there and then how do you dry yourself? I mean, do you use the toilet paper? Do you use the towel? Is everybody using the same towel? [laughs] It's like, I need to ask about that before I die.

# Christina Ayson Plank 54:01

[laughs] I remember going because we had one in my household. And I remember visiting my friend for the first time and it was like my first sleepover. And she was a white woman. And I remember, you know, doing my business and looking around in her bathroom for a tabo and I was like "They don't have that here." I was so confused by that.

**Eva Alminiana Monroe** 54:04 [laughs] Went to bed feeling dirty.

**Christina Ayson Plank** 54:27 Yeah, it was, "this isn't right."

**Eva Alminiana Monroe** 54:29 [laughs]

# Christina Ayson Plank 54:30

I kind of want to backtrack a little bit. Talking about race relations in Watsonville, did you ever hear about the riots growing up?

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 54:42

No. My parents did not talk about the riots. I only heard about the riots within the last couple years. Uhm-hm. Never heard about it in watsonville. By all rights I left Watsonville after high school to go to college, and so didn't hang around to hear more talk from the adults, when they might consider me older and okay to listen to this kind of stuff. But as children, they didn't talk about this. I was shocked when I heard about it. This story of Fermin Tobera. And then I'm reading more and more about this through the things that are being published in Facebook and magazines and things like that. But honestly, growing up, we were very protected from that kind of information. I think they wanted to sort of maintain the fairy tale of this is the land of everything and opportunity and bad things didn't happen. You know, just put your nose to the grindstone, study, get your work, and you'll be okay. But I know amongst themselves they talked about it, especially the men.

**Christina Ayson Plank** 56:01 Why do you say that?

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 56:03

I would see them at times talking and their brows would be furrowed, you know, they would be talking about some slight that they—the day that may have occurred. And they would talk about the puti, which is the word for white. "Oh, the puti this and the puti that." You know, "You can't trust them all. Some are okay. Some are not." And even my Father around them was more nice than he needed to be. I used to think, "He's being really nice to these guys. Is that necessary?" Yeah. So back to my Dad mixing it up in Watsonville. He was a member of the Optimist Club. And he was a member of the VFW and he was a member of the Knights of Columbus. They were not—when he was a member of the Knights of Columbus—there were no Filipinos in except my Dad. And so eventually—and I don't even know who became a Knights of Columbus after that because I was gone. Maybe Benny Tabancay was. But maybe not because Ben Ragsac and Benny Tabancay also belong to the lodges, which were Mason in Foundation. Which is in, you know, Catholics and the Masons didn't mix. So my parents went to all Catholic group. In fact, my Mother founded the Filipino Catholic Association with Dr. Gonzalez in Salinas. And that was the first and they were spread out, up and down California for a while, and even back east. But I think it's since just dissolved.

# Christina Ayson Plank 57:44

What about kind of like inter ethnic relationships, so relationships with other communities of color, in Watsonville?

# Eva Alminiana Monroe 57:58

The most obvious interaction would be with the Mexicans because Filipino men married some Mexican women. We didn't know—we didn't do anything with the Japanese. Although our next door neighbor was Japanese, Doctor Kota, they were really wonderful, nice people. And my parents had a nice relationship with them, but guarded. And I was over there all the time.

Because they were wonderful. There was a big Portuguese population. And they—the Portuguese—mixed it up with everybody. There was also a cultural component of people who came from the dust bowl; the very poor whites. And they were not treated very well in Watsonville, because—for many reasons. I guess because they were dirt poor when they came, they were very ragged. The Filipinos at least tried to look neat and clean. But these poor people, it was just raggy. I'm trying to put it within a context that I saw. So at church was probably the best mix in place for all these people. Everybody came to church, and the guilds, the mothers clubs, the fathers clubs, all—they all had, mainly Caucasian, and a few Filipino and Mexicans. And it was usually typically the Filipinos and the Mexicans that had business.

They were more used to interacting with the puti. And the guys who stuck with the lodges or the fields, you didn't see a lot of interaction. Not that I could see. Juanita may have a different story because she had a different experience. And I really wasn't aware of the differences until now. Because I wasn't apart of that part: the lodges and the cockfights and everything. And I'm bummed, I would have loved to see the cockfights [laughs] and gone to the camps because Juanita said they were lots of fun. The closest we got to that were the pig roast and things that we had at the labor camps—and they, probably behind the camps, were cockfighting. But I never saw it.