

NEH Grant - Robert Ragsac - June 18 2024

Tue, Sep 03, 2024 4:37PM • 1:17:30

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

filipino, talk, filipinos, kurt, call, family, philippines, write, thought, historian, story, tour, history, people, filipino american, retrospective, dad, documenting, book, ralph

SPEAKERS

Robert Ragsac, Mae Lee, Karen Wang

Mae Lee 00:05

Hi. Today is June 18, 2024, Tuesday. I'm Mae Lee and Karen Wang. I am affiliated with the Asian American and Asian Studies Department. Karen Wang is a student research intern with the department, and we're working on this oral history as part of an NEH grant called Asian American Storytelling in Santa Clara Valley. Today we are interviewing Robert Ragsac at De Anza College in Cupertino as part of the grant, NEH grant on Asian American Storytelling in Santa Clara Valley. So thank you for being here. The first question actually, is about the retrospective.

Robert Ragsac 00:44

The retrospective.

Mae Lee 00:45

Yeah, and the question is that, in, well, I guess, about documentation, and how you how and when you started documenting your life story, your family story, and also the history of Filipinos in San Jose, Japantown. So we know that you wrote that retrospective in 2008 we also know that in 2006 around that time, Curt Fukuda and Ralph Pearce approached you for the book that they were writing and asking you about the Filipino ethnic enclave in San Jose, Japantown. So the first question is, can you tell us how you got into documenting these stories, your story, your family story, and then the bigger Filipino American community story of San Jose, Japantown.

Robert Ragsac 01:32

Okay, well, it was back in, I even forgot the year, maybe what was the date of the retrospective?

Mae Lee 01:43

2008. Yeah, the first version

Robert Ragsac 01:45

Okay, first version. So about three years before, I was at a funeral for a friend of mine, and I met Al Robles, who was an activist in San Francisco and a poet and well known, got involved in the I-Hotel

and the big riots there. And when we got talking about our generation, which is what we call the bridge generation, and that's the children of the first wave Filipinos and Filipinos that migrated here in the United States in 1920s and 1930s and he was, he was talking about, you know, there's a lot of us that have not documented our stories, so why don't you, Robert, why don't you write something about that? What, what I never even thought of that. He says, Yeah, you know, just write something about how you what it was like when you were growing up. And say, that's a good idea. So about two or three years it took me to write that off and on, because I was working full time. So I finally got it written, and I called Al. I said, Al, let's meet sometime, because I got it done. What do you want to do? You want to do, bud? And he said, Okay, let's meet. I said, All right, let me I'll give you a call when I got free time. And this is the great lesson. I called him and he had passed away. So just a little bit for fast forward. Curt and I, when we do our history detective things, he says, don't wait if you're going to interview somebody, or you're going to talk about something, or you're going to write something, or you're going to give a presentation. Don't wait, because we both experienced the same thing. We're going to do something. This is great, great resource, but he passed away so that so I didn't know what to do with it. So I thought, well, I'll just give out to my friends, all right, so. And about that time, let's see. I have to go back 1970s or so. I got involved with the Filipino Youth Association, FYA, or something like that. And that day they asked me, I forgot who was it. Asked me, I'll think of it later. But he asked me, could you help us talk to these older Filipino generations? And I said, Well, what can I do? You know, I'm not involved. I don't do that kind of thing. And they said, Well, just help us with the incoming new immigrants. I said, Well, yeah, I could do that. But then as I got involved with this group. I thought, you know, one of the things that I that always bothered me is that amongst all of these Filipino organizations, there's no coordination among them. So I always thought somebody was going to have a big celebration on one day. Yeah, on that very same day, that's another organization is going to have another, a gigantic annual picnic. It would be nice if they coordinate. And I thought, well, here's my little bit about and I talked to you about me attending those classes at Stanford, in anthro(polocy), soc(iology), working with organizations. I thought, well, I'll use some of that. So I called together all of the leaders of those organizations, and I said, and I've had this meeting, and I said, Here's what the plan is, you just coordinate. All we want is just a coordinating council. And I thought, it's simple. We don't have to do - nobody really gives us any of their power. Just coordinate. We're going to have this big celebration on Rizal Day. Don't have a birthday party or a queen contest on that date. And I thought that was pretty simple. However, I never thought that I missed the cultural aspect of it, and that is a lot of in those days, in the 1970s and it's probably true in even in my day, in the 1940s that a lot of their culture is who is going to lead, who is going to be the president, the chairman or the leader. And I said, Well, nobody, we just will have a chairman, of course, when we have the Coordinating Council. But I got the sense that they were not ready to relinquish any of their decision making to another body. And so a few months after that, after we've gone through all of this activity, tried to get to get this thing to work, this Coordinating Council, I thought, I'm out. It's not going to work. And besides, it's I felt it's just, even though I know a little bit about organizations, I didn't know enough about how a culture of the Filipinos the first wave, would fit in an American type organization, so that didn't work out well. Alright, so now we're at 2008 but earlier than that, this is Curt. Now, Curt and Ralph. So when I was working with the Filipino Youth Association, when we were doing this Coordinating Council, one of the the Filipinos I worked with was Cleto Anacleto. It turns out that Ralph Pearce, his wife is Emily Anacleto. So when Ralph and Curt were doing the Japantown book, it was, I think both Ralph and Curt felt, thought that there was a Filipino community during the Japantown era, or the what we now call the Chinatown era.

And he's it just so happens that Ralph, but, well, he told Emily that now, and he says, Well, yeah, that's that my dad worked with a guy named Robert Ragsac. So they, Ralph called me, they got my number, and they said he and Curt are writing this book about Japantown, but they felt they don't. They want to have it more than just the Issei and Nisei, the first and second generation in in Japantown, they would like to expand it because there was another ethnic organization like the Chinese and the Filipinos, I said, Sure, I'll help you. What we'll do is that I'll get together with all of my cohorts, my generation, and for those first wave Filipinos are still alive, we'll arrange to get them video recorded. And so we did that. We, Curt and Ralph, we sat down with a lot of my generation. We said, bring your books, bring your albums. Don't make a decision as to whether or not the photos are appropriate, just we'll decide that for you. And to the extent that you can, you bring your friends or your your siblings, because if you just interview one person, you have their memories just like it's going to happen here too, right? Because my sister, I always say my sisters, have better memories than I do about what happened around us. So what we did was we set a place, either at their house or someplace as convenient, or at Curt's, because he had a recording material equipment. So we thought, Well, okay, so we had, we got together at somebody's house. They had the albums. They had their siblings two to three, and so we'd go through the photograph. We'd say, What's this? Who, what, when, where, we had it scanned, and then next to it on our laptop, we recorded what was on that photograph, to the extent that they remember. Now, here's a lot of problems with photographs, so it's really great, but we don't know who they say, Well, I'm not sure who that is. There's nothing in the back, and it's only from their memories. Well, I think that's Auntie Somebody. So to the extent we can, we just say the family name, but sometimes we get a little more detail, and we did that with one or two Filipino, first wave Filipinos, but by that time, most of them had passed away. So what came out of this was a lot of material, a lot of video recordings, photographs, stories that appear in the Japantown book, Curt and Ralph's Japantown book. So, and I don't know when it occurred, but maybe I was still working, and I was talking to a lot of my friends who was we were just sitting around talking about old days, the old times. Hey, do you remember the Dobashis and do you remember the Buddhist temple? And how about when we played basketball against the Zebras, the Nisei basketball team? And I said, Yeah, right, maybe we ought to get to a walk around, and we'll just go just a month, or my little group, maybe just three or four of us, or five of us, and we started walking around. Do you remember Toshi's with the fountain there? Yeah, Tom and Mary's? And remember when we played the Zebras, the Zebra Bs? That kind of story is when we're going around, and then we go down Sixth Street and say, Oh yeah, remember Escalante's pool hall, yeah, how about the time when all these Filipinos were out there on the street, you know, just talking stories, right? Well, it's already great. And then I thought, I wonder if maybe somebody else would be interested in this. So, I think, in 2018 I had this idea, maybe we ought to have a formal tour, and I'll just let somebody know. Now, I don't know who that somebody is that I or or maybe one of my friends contacted somebody says, hey, you know we're doing this thing. And I thought, Oh yeah, okay. Well, we'll do is just invite everybody who wants to come. It's very informal. No sign up. Just show up. It was March 2019, the first time we held a formal tour organized. And prior to that, I thought, well, I'll just write down on a on a pamphlet using a PowerPoint style, you know, here's a location and a little description in facing page text, and it was about 20 pages or something like that. And I said, Well, I'll be cool, because I always found out in my professional life, when we give briefings to to the our customer, we have always, always have a report. And then when I give up my my, my little thing I have little something that I specific to my part of the project. So I so I said, Well, I'll do that for this group. So I

made up. I don't think I made enough copies, because a lot of people showed up. Now I I have a photograph of the group, and it's something like 25 or something, people

Karen Wang 13:59

The first tour group. I mean, the first official tour, the Pinoytown tour?

Robert Ragsac 14:08

Well, it's not what I call official. It's just, hey, we're going to have this tour. Call your buddies and meet at the Japantown bench at Fifth and Jackson, and we'll see who shows up. So I made copies of the book. But I don't know if I just said, I guess, you know, I made 10 or 15, or whatever it was, and I told Curt and Ralph, just, hey, that's a great idea. Is there? Okay, we recorded. I said, Hey, yeah, that's cool. Yes. So I so I discovered again last night, when I was thinking about singular questions, I said, I think, I think Curt recorded it. Yes, he recorded the entire tour, along with the questions and comments that that people had and and we. We had my sister who's good, had better memory, and my brother in law, my sister's husband, my sister Elaine and her husband, Rudy Quibelan. And we had one of my peers, Eugene Reintar, also his nickname was Pinky, who lived in there, in the boarding house. His dad and him lived there in Sixth Street. So I went to the recording. I said, Gee, this is great refresh my memory as to what this is all about. So that's what I would like to think started the tours, that would we call it the official tour, because, you know, it was announced by word of word of mouth, but in that the videos, I'm sure, is Tony Santa Ana and Ann Regino now. And Regino is a Filipino American National Historical Society, principal in the Santa Clara Valley Chapter. And it was, it was her and her friends. I said, Gee, why don't we do this officially, formally? So I said, Well, yeah, what do you mean by that? Well, if you want, we could take over managing the tour. We'll put up the website. We'll do the formal sign up, we'll do the legal document dish. And so I said, Well, yeah, but how are we going to do it? Because 2019 what happened was covid. So just, oh well, we could write out the social distancing, wear masks, and it will still do the tours. So in some of the later tourists, that's what we did, and it was the Filipino American National Historical Society, Santa Clara chapter was Mark Serrano, Ann Vinoya, and Ann Regino. They're the ones who are the principals of that chapter, and they took over that tour. So what happens now is that people can go to the website, and if they get enough people to sign up, then we'll have a tour, or organizations, sometimes a class from a college or school, or we have a younger group, say, you know, the high school groups and the Asian Studies or Filipino Studies. And so we give tours, and they sign up through the website and the FAHNS chapter, the Santa Clara Valley Chapter, takes care of all that, and so I should say too, but when they did decide to do that, I said, Well, you know, there's a lot of stories that you don't know about, so let's have a training session. So I wrote up a script with all the material and the, of course, just not the younger kids. So I had not, you know, the hard copy. They take notes, they put it on their cell phone, and so when they give the tour, that's pretty cool. I envisioned old school look at the hard copy. Well, one of the docents, or the guides, had three by five cards, and then some of the others just on the cell phone, as well as on the cell phone, just additional material, like when you talk about discrimination. Well, we talk about the discrimination that we experience, but they talk about it in general. They could come up and say, anti miscegenation laws, those kinds of things. So they add something to it. So my role in these tours said, I give what I call the color commentary. You know, there's a principal speaker, and just like in the sport describing a sport event, and the color commentary comes in and gives background information. So I tag along. They give their little talk, and they say, oh, yeah, this side here, there was a Chinese couple, or I delivered newspapers to this Black

couple here, you know, something that's not in the script, it's personal stories. So there is the story that they give about the buildings and some of the people, and then anecdotes that I add in in addition to that. So that's how the Pinoytown tours came about, and that's how. And it was because of, I would like to believe that because of, I guess the germ started with Al Robles, when I expanded my horizons a little bit. And then, of course, with Ralph and Curt, it became even larger than I could, could ever have imagined

Mae Lee 20:22

Can I follow up on that? Just to ask as as you were writing, you know, prompted by Al to write your retrospective, and then Ralph and Curt approached you about their book, and then this tour, did you think your writing of your life story and the documentation? Did you think it was historically important at the time. How did that? How did, how did you think about the importance of what you were doing?

Robert Ragsac 20:48

Oh, it was pretty, I would say, was pretty narrow. That's just writing this thing. And, well, when I wrote the retrospective, now that's the first time I did a hard documentation, actually writing about things that happened around me. So I had never done that before. You always think about it in your memories, and you talk with your family, but you never that's the first time I documented it, and it was just for that purpose. Al asked me to write this, and I said, Okay, I'll write it, and I'll give it to you. You're going to do whatever you because I think he asked other people to do the same things. So I said, Well, okay, I'll just write it. And it was just pretty narrow, and it became much larger when I got involved with Ralph and Curt. Now they're historians and they're writers and documentarians, so I've never done any of that before. You know Curt. Curt has done tremendous background. He has a tremendous background in documenting and historic history. History, and then, of course, the Japantown book, same thing with Ralph. He's an author. I'm just contributing material. I said, Okay, I'll get the people together. You got the material, you got the video recording, you got the photographs. Oh, you need something. You write about that. Yeah, I'll cook up something here. Send. So it I didn't think that was historically important until the book, Ralph's book, came out, and Curt's book, if you've seen the book, right, it's that thick, weighs about five pounds. And I went through it and thought, people who have this book could see not only what happened in Chinatown, Japantown, Pinoytown, we're part of it. And it's the first time, other than in technical documents, the first time that you look at the index, that's my name, my sister's name, my buddies, my friends, the old Pinoys. You look at their names there, and then the acknowledgements, Curt or Ralph did a great job in thanking me and the family and all of us for contributing. Then it dawned on me that you know, this is pretty important. This is really meaning, meaningful stuff, and it contributes to somebody who wants to know about Japantown will find out a little bit more about the Filipinos. So that widened my horizons quite a bit.

Karen Wang 23:40

I guess like just to talk more about that, in your AAPI Perspectives interview at JAMsj, you said that you used this phrase. You said you began to coalesce your experiences of racism from when you were young all the way up until maybe when you were older, when you started getting involved in that book project, and in particular, you mentioned that you had all these conversations with Curt and Ralph that sort of helped you coalesce that. And I was just wondering if maybe you could tell us a bit more about the conversations you had. Is there any that you remember or found like particularly memorable?

Robert Ragsac 24:17

Well, you're right that a lot of the conversations bring up the memories, and some of that memory is written that shows up in the retrospective, right? Because in the beginning, in the first page, I thank all these people. Those are the people I had the conversations with, and a lot of their thoughts are in that retrospective. So it when I at the time that we were doing this, talks with conversations, I didn't think it was important, it was great. But when I thought. Started thinking about this ought to be written down in retrospective. So we had further conversations. Now I'm a little more concerned, so I start writing notes, or I asked questions, and I said, Do you remember the when we had the formal dance? All the all the Pinays were wearing their formal dresses. Do you remember what you wore there or so that says, Oh, that's right, we had a formal dance. So in the retrospective, there's the picture of the San Jose Agenda Club of Filipino Youth with this with all this Pinays in their formal dress. Well, I had never thought about that until somebody said that. I said, Where's the picture we have? I know we have a picture. So those kinds of things, is how those conversations became documented, not only in the retrospective, but they show up also in the tours. Because a lot of the material that are that I wrote in the tour book were also based on conversations or memories or talks that we had informally. And so as I wrote, as I read, describing one of the illustrations, I think, well, yeah, that's right, somebody said something about that. So I call my sister, who was it that? Or we call one of my buddies so and then I firm up the wording so that it's as accurate as memories can be. So that's how a lot of it, if we didn't have those kinds of conversations. At first, when you have these family talks, you just talk what we call talk story. We just sit around talk stories. Everybody started laughing on that, but as I got more involved, then I thought, we ought to start thinking about documenting this. And I thought, well, that was, that's great. I'll use that and follow up on a topic, and then use that in the in the retrospective, the tour book, and I think I did the same thing for the Japantown book. Now, in fact, that's a complete point you made that when I tell Curt, I told Curt this, you know, I had this conversation with my sister and my buddies, and we're sitting around and we're talking about this, and Curt, the documentarian, says, We got to record you. I said, What do you mean? I says, when you have a family dinner, can I come over with my equipment and record it? I said, yeah, yeah, right. Because the stuff we talk about, we laugh, and then we go everything, and it'll, in fact, it almost happened last night when my sister and I were talking. We had dinner with my two sisters and my brother in law and my niece, and we're just sitting talking, and it's exactly the same thing why we're talking. I says, Curt should have been there. So one of these days, this is another thing that we're going to do. Curt says, One of these days again, hopefully soon, when we get together, we're having dinner. Says, Curt, I'll tell you, you better be ready. He says, You tell me, I'll drop everything. You'll come over and do the recording, just like we're doing here to record those lost memories, because when you do a conversation, it's interactive. This is, oh yeah, I remember that, and then you start expanding on it.

Mae Lee 28:35

In those conversations you had with Curt and Ralph, did you have conversations about race and racism and discrimination. Or how did that? How did you think about your sense of identity? Or did that your sense of identity change? Or did you think about how your own thoughts or awareness of race or racism changed as you were getting involved in these projects?

Robert Ragsac 28:56

That did not occur, but the major one, of course, is Executive Order 9066, right? We talked about that only to the extent that, like Curt talks about the effect on the Issei and Isay. And then I said, I think I do use this in our tour, one of our tours, because we stopped, we stopped at the Buddhist temple, right? And there's a story that that came up and I told Curt and Ralph this, I don't think it shows up in the book, or is it's not, oh yes, it's now in the tour book. And that is that how the evacuation of the Issei and Nisei affected our family, because we lived next to a Japanese family. So in April, May of '42 we saw my sister told me this, and I have a memory of it, because I was only 11 years old in '42. The next door neighbors were the Iwasaki family, and they were, we, my sisters. I remember Aki, her friend was the daughter of the Iwasakis. They were coming out at the house, and then as soon as she said that it hurt my memory. They're carrying their bags and their luggage and anything they could carry out until Sixth Street, Fifth Street, and then there's a lot of people gathering on Fifth Street, all the Issei and Nisei. So that's not discrimination or race, per se. It's the impact of the Executive Order which is the major discrimination, right? But we didn't talk about that personally in the book, like work experience or or court experience, or any of their family experience. So that never came up in during the writing of the book, it comes up on occasion, just as I said, how it affected us or my family when the evacuation order came out. Now, there's stories about this racial discrimination that I don't really dwell on when we do the tours, because the tour is about the Filipinos their life, the social interactions with the Chinese and the Japanese and that kind of thing. Because from my accounts and the memories of my generation amongst the three ethnic minorities, the Chinese, Japanese and Filipinos in Chinatown, to the extent that we can recall, there was no real riots or mass fights between or amongst the three races. There may have been altercations, but among the three races, there was no fighting or writing or anything among them. Now, within like the Filipinos, there's a lot of fighting and battles and going on, but, but, but there was no interracial among the three minorities, any kind of altercation or conflicts that I, that I know of, so that so like the question is, was, was race and discrimination part of our narrative? It wasn't that, not within that context.

Mae Lee 32:41

Related to that. I was thinking in your retrospective, you really focus on your sense of being Ilocano and not Filipino. And in fact, someone said you're not really not Filipino to your dad and the airport. Was it right? So have you seen your sense of identity? Did it evolve as you were participating in these projects in terms of either Ilocano identity or Filipino or Filipino American identity?

Robert Ragsac 33:03

Well this goes back quite a bit. Well, actually, within context now in Pinoytown, they were all Ilocanos, right? Because when the mainland farmers and in Hawaii too, the Hawaii Sugar Planters Association, their experience, I think it started with the Hawaii Sugar Planters Association. They hired something like 15 or 16 sakadas, which is the contract workers. That was the 1900s, 1906, I think it was right after the Philippine American war. They found out that Ilocanos were hardworking, don't complain, and were reliable and worked for really low wages. And so when fast forward to 1920s the Filipinos start migrating here from Hawaii, or they came directly to Seattle or to San Francisco. But mostly a lot of the sakadas from in Hawaii migrated to the main man. My dad was one of them. He was a sakada, Sergio Ragsac, and he had - his friends were all Ilocanos. All of them were and they all settled there in the Sixth Street area, or they were in the labor camps around the Valley, but they would go to Pinoytown for the gambling restaurants and laundry and all that kind of for socializing and the Filipino organizations.

So they would all meet there in Sixth Street. So as I was growing up. All the Filipinos are Ilocanos, right until, I think it was my mom was very friendly with a Tagalog family, the Ravelos. So that was my inkling that, yeah, we're Filipinos, and not just all the Ilocanos. They're Tagalog too. So, but that was just Tagalog, and that was just a passing thing. My best friend was Ray Ravelo. We went through elementary school, junior high, high school, together, and that was my first this has to be in the 1930s that found out, yeah, that's a Tagalog family. That's different. And then as I grew older, then I found out that the Philippines has something like a multitude of languages, right? But as I grew up, it was Ilocanos, all of us. We just all my friends, were Ilocanos. So what happened then is that it became one of the things that if you're Ilocano, you're a good man and you're a good guy, because we could relate, right? It's almost like being a member of the same organization. You find out, Oh, you remember, oh, yeah, now you were brothers or closer, right? Well, that so that kind of pervaded me, and then it became one of those kinds of jokes, I guess, or or commentary. So several times when I've given a talk to a college group or a high school group or some group, I say, Hi. I'm Robert Ragsac. My last name is ragsac. Narag ak, any Ilocanos in the crowd? Do you know what that means? It means happy. Well, sometimes when I say that, I say naragsak. I get the Filipino kids - Ey, it means happy! so. But I use that as a warm up, to break the when I'm talking to a Asian group, and it sort of helps the conversation, the talk, move along and then, of course, I say, Well, yeah, but there's more than just that. You know, there's we had that we I'm grown up as I grown up, I know people who speak Bicolano, Cissaya, and, of course, Tagalog. And then, of course, the Ilocanos. So that expanded my horizon culturally about the Filipinos. And it's, and I should say that it's, it's one of those things where I'm surprised when I say to a group of people that I'm Ilocano. And I always say, any Ilocanos in the crowd, a lot of them come up and say, proud to be Ilocano. So it's and I'm surprised. That's something I learned just recently. You know, maybe in five or six years, when I started talking to groups of Filipinos, and a lot of them say they're really proud to be Ilocano. And not only that, my neighbors are Ilocano, and their feeling is that Ilocano should be the national language not Tagalog, right? So I'm getting this from the youth and from my neighbors who are who are recent immigrants, they came in the 60s and 70s, and they're younger, meaning they're 60 years old.

Karen Wang 38:54

How do you think that relates to, like, being Asian American? Like, there's also this sort of, like, pan-ethnic Asian American identity that you know we speak about, or we might say, Oh, I identify. Do I identify as like, Would you identify as Asian American? Why? Or why not?

Robert Ragsac 39:09

Oh, let me give you a great story. I was, I was part of a panel, and we're talking about Filipino American history, and so we're talking about our experiences and our perspective. And afterwards, I think we took a break, so we're in the break room, and we're talking about Filipino American and like you said, the identity. I said, Are we Asian? Are we Pacific Islander? I said, here's my thought, cause they're saying, Well, we're Asian. I said, Well, no, we're Pacific Islander. I said, Wait a minute. I said, The Philippines is an island in the Pacific, right? So. And it's not associated with the Asian continent, right? So we're Pacific Islanders, right? And they say, a lot of us say, well, it's part of the Asian I say, Well, but geopolitically, the Philippines is an island in the Pacific, so we're Pacific Islanders. But that was just a lead in because the real, my real feeling, is, if you look back at the history of the Philippines, way back before the Spanish era, there was tremendous amount of trade going on between mainland China,

Southeast Asia and Japan before the Spanish showed up. And there's tremendous number of trading posts or trading ports in the Philippines. Now you have this big influx of the Asian mainlanders, and of course, they intermarry, then later on comes in Spanish and they intermarry. So yes, if you look at the anthropology of the Philippine Islands, we're Asians. You could look at the geography, and I only use that just as a lead in for the real story that. And then we talked among ourselves, and we said, yeah, that sort of makes sense that yet, the Philippines is an island away from the Asian mainland, but culturally, socially, anthropologically for Asians and so Asian Americans. Try that one.

Mae Lee 41:50

Does that? Does that - when you think of yourself as a - or, I don't know if you think of yourself as a community historian, I think of you as a community historian. How do you approach your work, or think about your work as a community historian? Maybe in relation to, like, when you wrote the retrospective, maybe you're just thinking, I'm a first generation Ilocano, you know, Filipino American. And then as you're writing more and working with, you know, Ralph and Curt, maybe you're thinking, I don't know. Oh, this is about the Filipino American ethnic enclave. And then as you're participating in talks, going to schools and all, maybe you're thinking, this is also Asian American. How do you think of your role as a community historian, maybe in relation to these evolving identities? Or what are you trying to what do you try to do when you're a historian, community historian?

Robert Ragsac 42:39

Yeah, that's a great question, because I don't consider myself a historian, because my perspective as historian is an academic. And then when you do history, and you want to do a story on the Filipino Americans, right, just do this tremendous amount of research, right? You go to the Library of Congress, you go to the genealogical store of websites and all that, I don't do that. And I guess the label historian came about only because the kinds of things I'm doing is documenting historical activities and events and people, but within the small area, so I didn't consider myself a historian as such. Now, Curt and I had this discussion one time about being a historian, because I called him a historian. I said, I look upon Curt, and I told him this you're the historian, and you're my mentor. And he said, No, we're not historians. We're History Detectives. There's something occurred. What went along with all that from the Filipino side, right? So we look into it, and we see what are the relevant documents that affect this event or this person or this group, and then we use that as part of the narrative for the tour, or in his case, for he did for the book, or he just write a document about that. But it's not, it doesn't. We don't. There's no intent, at least in my poem, that anyway where it gets published, I'm not writing. At least I didn't intend to write to publish. Now, of course, Ralph is a historian, and I still consider Curt a historian. They said we have in some material to write a book. I said, Yeah, I guess so. One of the days we ought to do that. But that thought was about 10 years ago, so we're still thinking about it, and it's what I call a WIP work in progress. So I guess people outside of what and see what I'm doing would say that's being an historian. Okay, I didn't intend to be one, but if that's what it is, then, sure, yeah, but I'd like to, I'd prefer to use Curt's term as a history detective. So we call ourselves HD, and I called him the senior HD, and I'm the junior HD, the history detective. And I like that term a little bit better, because I don't want to be called a historian, because I don't have that, that academic training, or the formal training, even informally training, of being a historian, and I grant you that the kinds of things I do at A lower level is what a historian would do, yeah, now associated with that, I think, is one of your questions, being an activist, right? I'm not an activist. I don't consider myself. I don't go to the any of the rallies. I don't go to

the parades or protests, or I don't join an organization that says we're going to work about this, on this political thing concerning Filipinos. I don't do that, but maybe some because we have a Pinoytown tours, it makes our story known. Which I think is an active kind of thing, because I want the story to be told. And so from that point of view, yeah, maybe I am a type of activist in this sense, but not what you would call, I guess, properly known as a, as a Filipino activist, but, but I am, but now there's another term I am, mission oriented. Mission oriented means that I want the Filipino American story here in Santa Clara Valley be told so any no things that get involved in supporting that I'll support. I'll do that. And of course, be careful of what you wish for, because I'm involved in so many projects Toward that end, and it's okay, it's a labor of love. I'll do it. It's all volunteer. Did that get to the question? I know we're floating around on your, on your

Mae Lee 47:47

This is great. No, this is very this is great. It's helpful.

Karen Wang 47:55

I think this is kind of a bit of a maybe like a different turn, but again, from the AAPI perspectives interview, you mentioned there's so you're telling this story right? You're getting this like story of the Filipino Americans in the Santa Clara Valley. But you said you're also worried about young people, like your grandkids, for example, going to college. And you sort of like hint at this sort of forgetting about their ethnic identity or history that seems to happen when they get older. I was just wondering if you could speak a bit more about, maybe, like, your thoughts on this, like, Why do you think this is? And also, like, if you've seen this happen with younger generations, or even, like, with your generation, like this during this transitional period?

Robert Ragsac 48:41

Sure, this might be long winded, but see, I'm a member of the Board of Directors of the Filipino American National Historical Society Museum in Stockton, and they have - the Filipino American National Historical Society has a convention every two years, and they call papers. They call for papers. And one of my - the president of the board at the time, Richard Tenaza, said he wants me to be on a panel. And I said, Yeah, what about? He says, mestizos. Now, mestizos is mixed marriage, children, okay? I said, Yeah, Richard, you know, I'm really full Filipino. I'm not a mestizo. It's just, and this guy is really sharp. He says, Yeah, but I have three or four others who are but I would like a perspective from someone who is not. I said, Okay, great idea. I'll do that, provided I'm last, because you want the mestizos. Or even be told first, and then I'll give you my perspective about what I see about mestizos, right? Do you know where that's going? That's the generation gap, right? All right. So I said, Okay, what I'll do is I'll come up with some kind of topic. So I started thinking about that, and I thought, well, I'll use my family as an example, because my sister married a Mexican, Mexican American, my youngest my younger sister married a Filipino, right? I married a Pinay. My son married a white girl, blonde, blue, white and a beautiful now look at it from the perspective as you go down to generations, right? So in my talk and I had a chart of the family tree, here's my sister, Helen. Married a Mexican they have a son, John Sanchez. Now his sister is Helen Sanchez, and her husband is lee, lee Sanchez, so they have a son. He's Hapa. We call Hapa as half now he married a white girl. Now you see what's happening. The connection of the Filipino is slowly dissipating. Now, sitting with my son, he married a white girl, and I have three grandchildren who are Hapa, you know? And so I use that as a

model that says, if you have a family, say that their mother and father are Filipino. Now I use Filipino, but it could be a German family, it could be an Irish family, but they intermarry with outside of their race, and so the succeeding generations now could lose their connection to being Filipino, or they could maintain that that heritage and be proud of that lineage, or they could ignore it, or don't want to be done, or they could be prefer the other half. So in general, when, when I gave this talk, I said, what's happening is that the mestizness, the Filipinoness, is dissipating, is disappearing, and the succeeding generations will will lose that unless you make a determined effort as a Filipino state you want them to remember the Filipino side to the extent that you can. Maybe some of the kids won't. They don't care. They may not be very proud of having being non white or having non white blood in them. So and I say this to the audience, is that if you are a parent, you have to be aware of the fact that the Filipinoness of your whether you're a Ilocano or Tagalog or wherever you are will dissipate and they will not, and succeeding generations, you'll be a great grandmother, and will your great grandchildren know that they have a Filipino connection? Or do they really care? Or do you care? And that's true for when I give a talk to the college kids were a group because I asked him, I said, When did your family? When did your parents come then, who did you marry? Now? How about yourself? And someone say, Oh yeah, my dad is Mexican, or my mom is Irish, or something like that. And I said, Well, do you know enough about your Filipino history? Someone say, No, this is the first time they even thought about it in this talk. And I always say, Well, if you really want your kids or you, and there's another one those old sayings from the old guy says, you're in the college kids now, right, soon as you get your sheepskin or your degree and get married, and you go off, you get a good job and you have children, right? Unless you make a determined effort your children, if you, if you marry a non, non Filipino, will have this mestizo, mestizo-ness. Dissipate. And I call that that phenomenon, the receding wave. Now, why is that? The first wave is the Filipino immigrants that came in the 1920s and 30s, or the or for the. Japanese. The first wave is the Issei, right? That came in the 1880s and 1900s right? So they'll have that same phenomenon. That's the first wave. I'm the second wave. My son is a third wave. But the waves are receding. It's not no longer appropriate as a wave. So it's a receding, what I call the receding wave.

Karen Wang 55:28

Is that why you there's a metaphor that you gave, that you said, you said, Asian, American history is like a beach. Is that related?

Robert Ragsac 55:36

Correct. I was just about to bring that up, because receding waves right or on the beach. The analogy I use is that picture American American history is a beach, and that beach is a whole lot of history of other races, right, absent in that beach. Turn of the century, I guess, is Filipino history, except for the Philippine American war and American history does not include them as part of history at all, because they're such Filipinos are such a lower class that they were not if you're not white, you're not part of the American history. So this beach, this white beach, for us who are historians. Now, we take our little bit of history, Filipino history, put it on that beach right now, I always like to think that what I'm doing is one grade put it there, but I would like to believe people like yourselves or like the Filipino American National History Society, have a teacup or a spoon and deposit to that beach. So that's what I that's why I say that the beach is American history, and it's lacking Asian American history. So now there is, say the Chinese role here in America, well, reasonably well documented only because they were laborers, right? They helped build the railroads, or they were or, like Connie was talking today,

yesterday, there were Chinatowns throughout the United States, but they were unknown. Rural Chinatowns were unknown. They're not part of American history. That beach. Did that answer the question?

Karen Wang 57:49

Why do you think that is like? Why do you think it's a beach without Asian American

Robert Ragsac 57:57

Well, look at all the exclusion laws right now for the Filipinos, it was the Tydings-McDuffie Act. Now, after the Philippine American War ended, the Philippines was ceded to the United States via the Treaty of Paris, right So one of the edicts that came out was that the Filipino people, if they choose, so, can get the status non citizen, American national. Non citizen, American National. So that meant that they could come to the United States without going to a visa or things like that. My parents came in 1927 from Hawaii and landed in San Pedro, and the only thing they had to worry about was get a ticket so they can get on the boat. But they had to stay in San Pedro, I think, for a week or quarantine. Now there are American nationals, but non citizens, which means that you can't vote and you can't own property, and not only that, for some because the influx was a Filipinos was mostly bachelors. Now, if you're a bachelor, you're 18, or 19, 20 here in the United States, and there were no Pinays, you're going to look for a woman, but you can't marry outside. But there are no Pinays here, so that those kinds of things, the exclusion acts, the Tydings-McDuffie, which was restricted no longer you're not American nationals. Now, for the tiny bit of it restricted the immigration to 50 Filipinos or something like that. So, what's happened is that there is no presence of or anyone interested in that time of documenting the Filipinos and Filipinos. History, or, for that matter, Chinese and Japanese history as part of the American, American history. And that's why I think that there's that void and to now, and it does my heart really good when I see people like Yvonne, right, or Tony, you know, and a lot of others, and then and the Filipino American National Historical Society and other Filipino organizations that are supporting what I call the Fil-Am history here in the United States.

Mae Lee 1:00:38

What are some ways, or what are some reactions that you've seen when you give talks or you leave the tour, or you lead the tour, or you make presentations or speaking to students or young people or college students. What are some kind of reactions that they have to learning about this Filipino American History? What, especially if they've never heard of it? Or what are some memorable reactions?

Robert Ragsac 1:00:58

Well, typically, the first thing is that they didn't realize that there was a Filipino American enclave here or in other cities. Because I could explain what happened here in San Jose, I said, but remember, this is not the only place that the Filipinos settled. And I use the term Street because here in San Jose, it was called Sixth Street, in Stockton, the Filipino community is called El Dorado Street. In San Francisco it's Kearney Street, in LA it's Temple Street. So when I tell talk to the students, first of all, they didn't know there was the enclave of Filipinos here in the 1920s and I said, well, there were others around the cities, in different cities, they never thought about that as so even some of the Filipino kids, well, when I talked to the Filipino kids, remember their parents just came recently. So there, and not only that, their

parents, most likely were professionals, lawyers, doctors, nurses, or they owned big businesses, or they're high tech people. You have to contrast that with the first wave Filipinos they came who were mostly all laborers. So when I talk to the students and I give this story, it's a revelation to them, first of all, that there is this. There is a history of the Filipinos before them, and then none. And the reaction I get sometimes is that, gee, maybe we're part, we're becoming part of it. Now you always say, Yes, you are, you should be. You should be, come becoming part of the American history and so, and this isn't along those lines, every time I end a talk, I tell students. I said, you know, I was a student once too, and I'd sit in there and listen to this lecture in history. I said, Well, that's really great. Go out the door. 90% of it will vanish, right? And I said, so it'll probably happen here, and I hope it doesn't, but I hope you remember most of it. But here are two things that I want you to remember. One, you write your dad and mom's story, if they're Filipinos, now, if they're Irish or German, write their story too, but get their story. Ask them why they left the Philippines. Second, write a family tree, two things that's easy for you to remember. Now. Why do I do that? Gets back to Asian American history, unless you document like I did. I'll just do this for AI. Well, now I'm saying you write it. You write your story, because someday somebody, a historian is going to say, didn't wasn't your family involved with that nurse's riot, and it was led by a Filipino and it was your family. It wasn't your mom a nurse? Unless you had that story, you could say, what? Yeah, I know my mom was a nurse, but I didn't know what she did, any of that stuff. So someday, and then, not only that, can you do a family tree? Now we're talking about the intermarriage and the Mestizo or Hapa. You got to get their stories too, because then maybe some of this fourth generation will say, I want to know about my family's history from the Filipino side. I want to know why my dad and mom left Cebu. My great grandfather left Cebu, the Visayas and. Something like that. Unless you do that, you're not going to make a contribution. So maybe I didn't answer the question of the reaction to students, but I give that to them. Now there is a one reaction that I did get, and that one Pinay raised her hand. She said, You know, I tried that with my mom, and she refused to talk. And somebody says, yeah, hey, I did that my dad, you know? He said, Well, you know, talk about, oh, they would give you a little bit of bits and pieces. I said, try this. First of all, there's a difference between conversation and interrogation. I said, like, if you want to talk to your mom, and she's Pinay, and she's a good cook, ask her where she got the recipe for pinakbet or Adobo or something like that. And she'll probably might say, Oh, I got that from my neighbor in the Philippines. Who's your neighbor? Oh, that was Mrs. So and so. Well, was she in the same province as you at the same time? Oh, no, I met her at the market. What market was that? In the meantime, be recording it. Put up their video recorders, because some of them, if you say, Why did you leave the Philippines? That's a big question. So that, anyway that that just one of the reactions I got, they will not talk. That's the students. So I say try that. And surprisingly, when I did give some of the talks, there's a few that said, I'm doing that. I'm doing that. Good for you, good for you. But did you do a family tree? Oh, I don't know. Well, do a family tree, I guess a lot of resources for that.

Karen Wang 1:07:03

Sorry, related to that. Because, like, I kind of noticed that you've mentioned this family tree in various contexts, and I was wondering, like, maybe, could you just, like, ruminate on what you think will happen if every single, let's say every single student who wants your talk did document their family tree, and now there's a bunch of family trees sitting around in stories. What do you vision? What happened with that collection? What would you want to see happen with that family trees? Yeah, let's say everyone did exactly what you said.

Robert Ragsac 1:07:32

You know, one of the things that's great about a family tree is that you as you do the research, you say on your name, on your surname, right? You'll find a lot of other surnames, other people who have exactly that same name. So if you have a family tree and you can make a connection with that other person, you bring your family tree over. Now the reason I say that is that that happened to me because my my dad in his second marriage, he took my stepmom to Kauai, and in the phone book, his wife happened to look up Ragsac, there's Ragsacs there. So my dad talked to them and said they're not related. And my dad, because he's not a historian or anything, he didn't pursue it any further. When he came back home, he told me about them. I said, Gee, that's weird. We're supposed to be all related. She said, Yeah, I know, but he said there was no relationship that they could make. I said, Yeah, well, that's too bad. So a couple years later, I took my girlfriend and I on vacation in Hawaii and went to Kauai. So I looked up the number, and said, Ragsac. So I called. I said, Hi, I'm Robert Ragsac, and this Pinay answered, and boy, she's got this Pinay accent, and she turned on, I heard yelling, oh, wait, Dominador. Oh no, honey. She said, Honey. And she's speaking Ilocano that there's somebody. And so he says, Hello. I said, Hi. I'm Robert Ragsac. Ragsac, do you remember my dad talking to you? And he said, Who? No. I said, I think we're I think we related. He said, oh, oh, maybe I said, Could we meet? Sure, I'm going to my my cousin meet me at the green water tower. He said. The green water tower. Where's the green water tower? Oh, come on. From the plantation, honey. There was a plantation. Finally, I got the word, oh yeah, there was that green water tower. He says, Okay, what time? 20 minutes? Maybe. I said, Okay, I'll be parking I have my hand out so I'm sitting parked there by the street. The car comes by. They look over the Filipinos. I said, hi. Oh, I said, Yes, follow me. So we go to the to it's actually his nephew, primo ragsack, and his family. They having dinner, so invited me and my girlfriend. I said, Oh, this is great. I gotta meet a bunch of people we don't know. So we're having never really cordial because Aloha style, right? The Filipino and aloha style. So we're sitting there, we're having a nice, a nice dinner, and we're talking, and I said, Well, you know, my dad doesn't understand how we're related. And he said, Yeah, neither Primo or his niece, his nephew or now Uncle Doming. I called him Uncle Doming, and I said, Well, I have a family tree that maybe that will help us. So I said, so I got the family tree. We sat down on the carpet, I rolled out the family tree, and I said, Here's Francisco Ragsac and Euphemia Reg. And then there's the brothers. And then one of the brothers is Francisco Jr, and I go through a bunch of names. And then there's Alejandro Ragsac. My dad said that Alejandro Ragsac is his uncle, and he left Santa Catalina when he was a little boy. My dad was a little boy, but he remember Alejandro uncle. He is uncle Alejandro. I look around, there's a big gaze, and their eyes are wide open. Domino Dors' Dad is Alejandro Ragsac, and Uncle Domingue is pure Filipino. I suppose I got chicken skin, which means your skin is crawling, because you know how, for revelation, your hair stands on end. That's their dad. So their nephew that that is hosting the dinner is my first cousin. Primo is my first cousin. Now, see, the story is, unless you have a family tree and you go to another person, that family tree doesn't mean anything except for that family, but at its value when you try to make a link, and we always try to do that when, and this is happening in in our Pinoytown tours, when we have the group we get, we ask each one, you know, what's your tie to the Philippines or to the Filipinos? Right? So each of them says something about their family and where they're from, and they go through, one occasion, somebody stopped and says, Where are you from, and where's your dad from? Do you know this? Do you know so it says, yeah, that's my auntie. That's my grandma. There's a relationship there. They discovered it in the talk only by mentioning names. Now, if they had, and I was hoping, if

they have a family tree, they can solidify that and make other connections. And I think that's really important. That's why, and because of those experiences, I always end the talk saying, Do you I did this at this convention, in front of this audience. I know all of you are in a rush to go eat in that lunch, but remember two things,

Mae Lee 1:14:12

Okay, we can have maybe one more. Unless you have another question, we'll just,

Karen Wang 1:14:16

yeah, we can see one. I think you can Okay, okay,

Mae Lee 1:14:19

maybe I'm just thinking, you know, this must be lots of unexpected learning and experiences you have in doing all this work you've been doing for, I guess, last 15 years, documenting, giving, towards presenting. I'm just curious, you know, what the most fun you've had, or what, what learning Do you feel like has been really valuable to you in this experience.

Robert Ragsac 1:14:42

Oh, yeah, what's so neat is that there is a lot that I've learned, not only about the people that I talk with in their history and their families, but I learned a little bit more about the perspective of the. Younger generation. You know, when I was younger, we had perspective like everybody else, right? And so we have a common topic about Filipino American history, but their perspective is a little bit different than mine or my sisters or anyone else. But I call that a, probably a generation gap, unless you make that connection or solidify it, their perspectives look quite a bit different. But I always try to find a commonality that will make our connection a little stronger, other than just Filipino American History, but sometimes there is no connection. You could see when you're talking to the people that they're very they're being very courteous, right? And so, and when I see that, I just continue talking. And then and then ended soon, sooner, because I know their their mind is somewhere else, but that's their perspective. And so I've learned to see that when, when we have, when we have talk stories. Now, fortunately, when I when they do have talk stories, people are there because they want to hear the story, or they want to talk story, and so it's very rare when I see people that are just yawning or hoping that this thing will end as fast as possible. I've learned that our social the social interactions that I expect from people, you know, I have to adjust and try to be as alert as I can to what they feel and what their perspective is. And the, I guess, the going in position I have is that do not talk down to them, you know, we just people talking talking story. You know that Aloha style, nobody's bigger better than anybody else. We're just going to talk story like we're doing here, right? Did that get the question? Thank you.

Karen Wang 1:17:15

Thank you so much. Yeah,

Robert Ragsac 1:17:17

You know what? You know that means time out, yeah, time out, yeah. I think that okay, yeah, I think we're great because I think I'm running out of time.