

# They'd drive hours in a storm to meet every new arrival: Stories from Alberta's first Filipino immigrants



Calgarian Aurora Dacanay moved to Alberta in 1965 to work as a teacher in Taber.

(Submitted by Aurora Dacanay)

Aurora Dacanay remembers jumping in a car and driving hours, even in blizzards, to greet every new arrival to Alberta from her home country, the Philippines.

A fellow Filipino immigrant, Amanda Toledo, shocked people watching her choir when they realized she was singing in Ukrainian, not just lip syncing.

And Clem Tigley fondly recalls meeting his wife among the crowds of young, single ladies in Calgary's early Filipino community, more than a half century ago.

These days, there are more than 166,200 Filipino-Canadians in Alberta — including more than 75,000 in Calgary alone, according to the most recent statistics, the 2016 census.

No one knows exactly when the first person came from the Philippines to Alberta.

But imagine back in the early days of immigration from the Philippines, when you might be the only one with that background for hundreds of kilometres.

Here are the stories of three of those pioneers:

## **Teaching 'with all the tall people': Aurora Dacanay, Taber, 1965**



After teaching in Taber and Exshaw in the '60s and '70s, Aurora Dacanay went on to work for the Calgary Catholic School District. (Submitted by Aurora Dacanay)

Aurora Dacanay immigrated to Canada in August 1965 and her first job was as a teacher in Taber.

"As far as I know, I was one of the first Filipinos to come here," says Dacanay, who left Manila in the summer of 1965 to work in Alberta.

She arrived in the province with two other Filipino teachers — one went to Lethbridge and the other to Fort Macleod.

And while Dacanay was certainly part of a wave of Filipino professionals — teachers, nurses and engineers — to immigrate to Alberta in the 1960s, no one from the community can say for sure who was the first.

But Dacanay remembers the early days of Alberta's Filipino community, and says whenever she and her friends heard of a new arrival, they set out to meet them.

"We would go right away. Because you were so eager, right?" she says.

"So we would drive to Edmonton. My landlady would say, 'Aurora, it's snowing. You know, there's a blizzard.' And we didn't know what a blizzard was at the time. And we experienced the car spinning around Highway 2 going up north to Edmonton."

Calgary was much smaller then, and Manila was already well on its way to becoming a megacity.

"There were only about 300,000 people at the time in Calgary. So you come from Manila, and it is a shocking experience. But it's so nice, too, because finally I got to Canada and I couldn't believe it because I'm going to teach here — with all the tall people! So it was really an adventure."

**'My priority was work': Clem Tigley,  
Calgary, 1968**



Clem Tigley, circa 1970, in the control room of Montreal Engineering Company (later Monenco) at the Sundance plant in Alberta. (Submitted by Clemente Tigley)

Clem Tigley is a retired electrical engineer who arrived in Calgary in July of 1968.

"My priority was work. I went door to door looking for a job. I was so fortunate that the first door I went through, one of the engineering companies in Calgary at that time, opened the door for me."

"There were so many nurses, single women, in Calgary at the time. And I was single when I came over. I was only 24 years old," he says.

"Every weekend there was a gathering and so I was introduced to them and, fortunately, my wife was in that

group and I was introduced to her. And it seems to me that it clicks.

"We just celebrated our 51st wedding anniversary last January."

## **'I thought I would die': Amanda Toledo, Myrnam, 1969**

Amanda Toledo is a retired nurse who now lives in Edmonton.

Her first job in Alberta was in the Village of Myrnam at the former Myrnam Hospital, in February 1969.

"It was really a shock for me when they took me there. I thought I would die," says Toledo.

"That was in February and the snow was higher than me, and it was very, very cold."



Amanda Toledo spent most of her career working as a nurse at the Royal Alexandra and Misericordia hospitals in Edmonton. But her first job was at the hospital in Myrnam. (Submitted by Amanda Toledo)

Most of the patients were 100 per cent Ukrainian, she says.

"Of course, it was hard for me to communicate with the patients," she says.

"So I took Ukrainian classes and I was able to speak Ukrainian and I started singing in the choir.

"The choir in Edmonton came just to watch the Filipino girl because they could not believe (it). They thought maybe I was lip syncing."



The former Myrnam hospital that Amanda Toledo work at in the 1960s. It now sits abandoned. (Joe Chowaniec)

- ***Hear more from these three pioneers in their radio interview on the audio link below, which has been edited for clarity and length.***

## Building a database of Filipino immigrants

According to researchers here in Calgary, neither the Glenbow Museum archives, nor the special collections at either the University of Calgary or University of Alberta has much material on the early Filipino community in Alberta.

But work is underway to change that, from within the Filipino community itself.

Ida Beltran-Lucila, president of the Philippine Arts Council, is [building a digital database](#) of the names and arrival dates of Filipino immigrants to the province — similar, she says, to the famous passenger records at Ellis Island.

"I've always been struck by the history when you go to New York and you see the murals of the registry of arrivals, and then you can see photos of what they look like," says Beltran-Lucila.

"It makes it more real for you."

So far, the earliest arrival Beltran-Lucila has found is a family who immigrated from the Philippines to Edmonton in 1961.



She found their names listed in a brochure of a 1995 event celebrating Filipino pioneers, but says no one in the community remembers them. Beltran-Lucila believes they have passed away and their relatives have moved elsewhere.

Records can be lost, or never kept, and memories fade.

But it's likely there were Filipinos in Alberta before the 1960s, as we know they were immigrating to Canada long before that.

There is some evidence of sailors settling on the coast of British Columbia as early as the 1880s.

A [1901 census of Bowen Island](#) found five Filipinos living in the coastal community, with one couple reporting they arrived in Canada in 1886.



Ida Beltran-Lucila says her goal is to record the name of every Filipino to immigrate to Alberta and the date they arrived in the province. ( Submitted by Ida Beltran-Lucila )

