

The Years That Counted

Evelyn T. Miranda

"If I were to live my past again, I would follow the same course I took. I have no regrets. I have no complaints." His voice rang with earnestness as he leaned back in his swivel chair. Leaning there, 58-year-old Professor Saturnino Cabanatan was a picture of years and experience.

On the other hand, sitting informally on one of the steps of the spiralling stair below the *azotea* of the Little Theatre of the University of the Philippines, friendly and always-smiling Professor Alfonso Santos confessed: "Whatever I am now, I owe to those hard days when I was a young man."

Both mentors in the University of the Philippines, Cabanatan and Santos paused from their hectic schedules and took time out to sit back and muse over those days gone by, days which to them made the years count.

Those "younger days" were about forty years ago in the 1920's when both were still at their prime. They were ambitious young men but without the means to improve their lot. However, America made all the difference in their lives. Filled with the spirit of adventure as characteristic of youth, they sailed for the United States with one common aim — to get a better and higher education by *all means!*

"It was easier to go to the United States then than today," Cabanatan explained. "No visa or anything of that sort was necessary. A *cedula* could bring you to any point of the country. Don't you think we were luckier?" he chuckled.

It was in May 1926 when the 23-year-old Cabanatan sailed for the new land. He had only a few hard-earned pesos tucked in his pocket when he went down the steer-

age, the cellar section of the boat that would carry him to America.

His adventure brought him to Washington where he became a dishwasher in restaurants for about a year. That was the best thing that he could do in the meantime, considering that he was completely a stranger in the country and that his resources were fast thinning out. For another two years Cabanatan wandered around the United States doing all kinds of menial jobs that came his way.

"I spent a couple of weeks in Seattle picking strawberries. It was a back-breaking job, but besides your pay you could eat as much strawberries as you want until your teeth ached. Another time I went to California to pick asparagus," Cabanatan recounted. "I also went to Alaska and worked in a salmon-canning factory. Just for experience, I tried stevedoring there, too."

After saving enough dollars to enter school, Cabanatan enrolled in the University of Michigan. "I was both a university student and a waiter in the university union," he said. "The job that really kept me in school until I finished my Master of Arts in English was dishwashing. It was a great meal-saver."

One of Cabanatan's "first-rate" jobs was as assistant of Mr. Freize, a professor in the University of Michigan. Cabanatan helped him in the revision of the Oxford Dictionary by reading all kinds of newspapers and listing down certain words showing how they are used by newspaper writers. Cabanatan said he got about a thousand dollars during his entire stay with Professor Freize.

Another job that helped him greatly in solving many of his financial problems was as machine-tender in the Packard Motor Company. He was paid \$80 to \$90 every fifteenth day of the month. But soon hard times came.

"I experienced real poverty in 1933," Cabanatan smiled as if to dismiss the whole incident as a bad dream. "The United States was in an economic crisis, and so was the whole world. I found myself out of school. I was then in my first year working for a doctorate. I looked for work — any kind of work — just to keep both body and soul together but jobs were so few. I later landed in California picking fruits and getting the measly sum of twenty cents an hour! That was terrible. Before the crisis, fruit-pickers were paid fifty cents an hour."

Famine reigned all over the country, and there was no immediate sign that the crisis would end sooner. Cabanatan, after saving enough money to pay for his fare, packed and came home to the Philippines.

Looking back at those difficult years, Professor Cabanatan, now U.P. assistant dean of student affairs, could only sigh and say: "I enjoyed those years. Hard work was nothing to me. I have been working as far as I can remember."

Professor Cabanatan got married after his arrival from the United States. He is the proud father of three practicing son-lawyers and a daughter who is studying in the U. P.

Professor Alfonso P. Santos of the English Department, like Cabanatan, was a poor man's son. He left San Antonio, Zambales for the United States at the tender age of 16.

"I persuaded my parents to mortgage our only piece of rice land so that I might be able to go to the United States. With ₱250 which was the mortgage cost, I boarded a boat for America. I stayed in steerage and I had the cows for company," he recalled with amusement.

He stayed in Palo Alto, California for a year and started his first year studies there. He transferred to Glendale and stayed there until he finished high school. All the time, he was working his way through school.

"I was a jack-of-all-trades. I practically handled all the lowest jobs there were. I became a dishwaster, janitor, waiter, cook, bellboy, telephone operator, ice-cream can washer, ice-cream and candy maker and many others." Santos gave a good laugh while enumerating his string of achievements. After he graduated from the high school, he enrolled in the University of Southern California as an A.B. student. Studious and hard-working, he graduated *cum laude*.

Santos was a popular figure in the campus. For three consecutive years he was the "poet laureate" of their university. He was also the recipient of many scholarships. Asked how he managed to excel in so many fields, Santos revealed his assets: "It was all a matter of mental concentration and discipline. My poverty was my disciplinarian. I believe," he added, "that poverty should be respected."

After getting his Bachelor of Arts, Santos continued stu-

dying until he got the master's degrees in education and English. He was about to get his doctorate's when the Second World War broke out. After undergoing military training in the United States army in New Guinea and Australia, he became the personal aide of General MacArthur, with the rank of staff sergeant.

"Indeed, it was quite a privilege for me to be so close to so great a man as General MacArthur," he said.

Santos came home in 1945 after the Liberation with one intention — to marry a Filipina girl. Asked why he did not pick an American for a wife, Santos simply replied: "Sandwich and *bagoong* just cannot go together."

As a scholar and poet, Santos appears in *Who's Who in American Education* and in the *Directory of American Scholars*, 1957. He is also an elected member of the Academy of Political Science.

Professor Santos has published three volumes of poems. They are the *Santang Buds*, *Etude in Blue* and *Di-*

liman Echoes. Presently he is working on another volume called *Yellow Bells*.

Even as poor, struggling students during their college days, Cabanatan and Santos were not devoid of youthful joys. Now and then they went out with American girls to movies, ball games, parties and other social activities.

"Of course there was a slight racial discrimination," Santos explained, "and for that matter, Filipinos and other colored students were not welcome to fraternity or sorority organizations. Anyhow, we still had fun."

Those were the years, the years that did count in the lives of these two humble scholars. They did count because they were spent carefully and wisely. Today, as Professors Cabanatan and Santos recall the past, no trace of regret or disappointment could be noted in their voices. There is only warmth and enthusiasm as they narrate their stories because they know they have quite a story to tell.

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