

Atimonan and Other Towns on the Mission Trail

Atimonan lies over the mountains from Lucena, the roccoco capital city of Tayabas which owes its glaring adornment (and some sound improvements too, such as the waterworks) to its recent governor, the Hon. Filomeno Perez, now saluted as the islands' secretary of commerce. Atimonan lies over the mountains, on the placid shore of Lamón bay. The ride is beautiful by rail or motor all the way from Manila, and motoring over the mountain pass is more thrilling than motoring up the zigzag to Baguio. The train, too, creaks round the sharp curves and puffs and labors along as if feeling its way. From car or coach, the view is delightful.

There is first the tedious climbing, then the dodging about in the cliffs, with little valleys like green mosaics below—all well-titled little valleys, with gurgling streams fended round their borders, and sluices in the embankments—and then, suddenly, the advent into the seashore plain and bird's-eye glimpses of the town as the motor speeds downhill or the train slips along, the engine braking the coaches like a family nag hunched back upon the breeching. One almost listens for the excited engineer to say "Whoa, there! Steady-y! Hold 'er, Meg!"

The grades are really difficult, and the train to take is the through train, the Bikol Express, leaving Paco station at noon—the train with the biggest engine and best coaches.

Toward evening this brings one to Atimonan; by motor the trip is a comfortable four hours from Manila, speeding and spoiling the view aside.

It is best to tell about Atimonan in Father Huerta's own words:

"In 1635, Moros from Mindanao invaded the town of Cabuyao, and, capturing a multitude of the inhabitants, set fire the town and destroyed it completely. Of the 800 to 1000 of the people, who were lucky enough to escape, some settled in the place called Atimonan and others at Mina-

nucan, forming out of the two new settlements, in 1673, a new pueblo with the name of Atimonan, whose first minister was Fr. Juan Gaviria.

The town is situated on a plain along a creek that forms the southern coast of Lamón bay, and to the right of a river which, running west to east, opens into the bay. Guinaca borders on the east-southeast, four leagues away; the ocean is on the south, a distance of six leagues.



Blockhouse at Gumaca

or that of the isthmus dividing the ocean on the north from that on the south; Pagbilao borders on the west, ten leagues away, and Mauban on the northwest, eight leagues away.

"Atimonan enjoys a temperate and salubrious climate, moderated by the winds of the north and east, especially from October to May. The commonest diseases are tuberculosis and skin infections. The town is supplied with well water, somewhat briny. Roads to surrounding towns are steep and difficult, in the rainy season almost impassable; although now (1865) they are building a splendid road which, crossing the isthmus, affords communication between the northern and southern towns. Mail is received from the capital Fridays and dispatched Saturdays.

"The church, under the patronage of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, was built of wood in 1638, and fired by the Dutch, together with the town, in 1640. In 1643 the church

was rebuilt of stone by Fr. Cristobal de Fuen-salida, and suffered the same fate as the one built of wood, in 1648. In 1650 it was again rebuilt by the indefatigable efforts of Father Fuensalida, but was later destroyed by earthquakes.

"Finally, in 1683, the church now existing was built, with its beautiful cross-vault, under the direction of Fr. José de Jesus Maria, who completed it in 1696. This church is surely the sturdiest temple in the islands. The foundations of its walls are 12 feet wide, and those of the façade 15 feet. Above the cornice is fixed a massive molave log supporting 24 roof beams. To all this labor we may add that the stone was brought from Mauban, distant 10 leagues, and that the sand used in preparing the cement was ported into the town a year before it was utilized, in order to free it from all traces of brine, and that the town at that time counted no more than 69 tributos (taxpaying families). Thus the indefatigable zeal of Fr. José de Jesus Maria is clearly evident; and, too, that the parish house, equal to the church in strength and beauty, was built at the same time.

"There is a stone municipal building and a primary school, supported with the community fund, and four other primary schools supported by the patrons. Most of the other houses in the town are built of wood. At present (1865) the parish priest is Fr. Samuel Mena, 30 years old, with a father cleric as his companion in the work.

"The terrain embraced in this pueblo is very rugged and its mountains abound in good timber, such as molave, narra, alintao, camagon, malatapay, yacal, baticulin, and a thousand more, with divers palms, rattans, and buri and sabutan, with many edible roots and wild game galore. The rivers are the Atimonan and the Minanucan, with a multitude of lesser streams. The cultivated fields produce a great deal of rice and corn, and some abaca, cacao, coffee and coconuts. The people are dedicated to farming; they market abaca and coconut oil, cut timber; and some are silversmiths and blacksmiths, some fishermen. The women weave piña cloth, sinamay and buri and sabutan mats; and these products, with the surplus rice, are sold in the neighboring towns.

"To the right of the main chapel in the church, near the wall and some four steps from the altar, is entombed the venerable Pedro Dimas Cortes, a native of the town of Salaya, near Queretaro, in America, who followed the life of a hermit and penitent for more than 24 years in the mountains that lie between Atimonan and Gumaca. He died July 23, 1715, attended by Fr. Gabriel de San Antonio, who wrote the admirable life of him which is conserved in our archives in Manila."



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There is much, very much indeed, of Spain in this little narrative. Christianity replaced animism, and the people were left much as they were found in all material things.

Atimonan is much changed now, however. Rice and corn are grown as before, but modern facilities and overseas demands furnish a better market for copra, and a great many more coconuts are planted; everyone has a flourishing coconut grove; Governor Perez points out that though Batangas has a much greater population than Tayabas, still there are about 50% more voters in Tayabas than in Batangas, an evidence of the wide ownership of real property. He asserts that the province as a whole is one of little farms, and perhaps this is true. If so, it is true of Atimonan.

The general prosperity from the coconut industry attracts a great many Chinese; one is astonished to learn that there are 260 Chinese in Atimonan, which, for such a small place, is a very substantial mercantile community. There is a private school, an academy, largely supported by the Chinese who are its patrons. Atimonan, like most towns in southeastern Luzon, has an assimilation problem. Time has always taken care of these matters, and no doubt will do the same again. But it is a little different now, and somewhat more disturbing, since the situation in China induces merchant émigrés to bring their families to the islands.

Well, anyway, that is Atimonan: Filipinos busy producing, and quite prosperous as prosperity goes among tropical peasants, and Chinese busy buying the products and selling all manner of imports.

Pagbilao. "This pueblo was founded in 1685, but had no regular minister until 1688, when Fr. Cristobal Montanez was assigned there. Its original name was Binahaan, from the river on whose shores the town was situated, distant about a league from the southern coast opposite Capuluan island. In 1702 it was made a *visita* of Tayabas, but became independent once more in 1724, with Fr. Francisco Pobre as minister. In 1727 it was removed to the present site, losing its name of Binahaan and taking that of Pagbilao from the river flowing nearby."

Pagbilao is hot but healthful, winds from the east and west prevailing. The Tambag river supplies it with water, its headwaters being on Mount Guitin. Even when Huerta wrote there was a first class road to Tayabas, with three wooden bridges with stone foundations.

The church is dedicated to Santa Catalina, virgin and martyr. It was built in at a date not stated by Huerta, and repaired extensively in 1845 by Fr. Victoriano Peraleja, who also built the stone parish house. Writing 20 years later, Huerta Pagbilao had a wooden municipal building and 50 other wooden houses, and a primary school supported by the community fund. Fr. Gavino Ruiz was then the pastor. He was 24 years old. Mountains in the vicinity are covered with hardwood timber, palms and rattans; there are quarries of first class stone and rich grazing lands for livestock. Fishing is good, providing the inhabitants a secondary industry; when Huerta wrote, farming, hunting and fishing were the industries of Pagbilao, as is no doubt the case today, only with more emphasis upon coconuts because of the new market. Rice lands are largely under irrigation and rice is the principal crop, unless coconuts now supplant it, with some production of cacao, coffee and corn. The women of Pagbilao weave buri bags and mats (perhaps also prepare buntal hats for the hats made in Lublan, one day) and, when Huerta wrote, "sell them, together with the surplus rice, in Tayabas and Sariaya."

Tiaong. Founded 1600: first priest, Fr. Juan de Sta. Clara. Patron, San Juan Bautista. "The church is of good materials, likewise the parish house."

Dolores. With certain *tributos* (native families) from San Pablo and others from Tiaong, founded in 1840, with Fr. Carlos Tena the first priest. Patron, N. S. de los Dolores: Our Lady of Sorrows. Father Tena built it and the parish house of timber.

Lopez. Formerly a *visita* of Gumaca called Talong, made a town June 30, 1857, by decree

of the superior (insular) government. Patron, N. S. del Rosario. When Huerta wrote no permanent church or parish house had been built.

This completes the journeys with the Franciscans through Tayabas towns: Tayabas,

ERRONEOUS TRANSLATION

In the May *Journal* there was published a translation of Juan Alvarez Guerra's description of an election in the town of Sariaya in 1875 in which the word *cuadrilleros*, spoken of as accompanying the *alcalde mayor* to the hall where the election took place, was translated *soldiers*. It is now possible to correct that error, a grave and regrettable one, by reference to that excellent work, *El Archipiélago Filipino*, by the Jesuits: "In the towns of the archipelago there were also the *cuadrilleros*;

Lukban, Sariaya, Gumaca, Mauban, Atimonan, Pagbilao, Tiaong, Dolores, and Lopez: ten towns with, when Huerta wrote, 83,093 inhabitants and 22,147 *tributos*. Next time we continue with the Franciscans into Albay.

that is, a fixed number of youths who in weekly turns were stationed at the *casa-gobierno*, municipal building, and were at the disposition of the *gobernadorcillo* and *principalia*, for such police duties and duties relating to public order which were not assigned to the Guardia Civil or the militia. Their organization was purely civil and they depended wholly upon the *gobernadorcillo*, captain or mayor of the town, who usually employed them to carry the mails where regular mail service had not been established." Here, then, is a very significant social unit which cannot be overlooked. These youthful volunteers for needful service, which was rendered free, were the worthy predecessors of the Boy Scouts of today in the Philippines.—ED.

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