UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

October 18, 2021
Jim Logan

‘Postcards from Salinas’

John Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath” told the world about poor white refugees who fled to California during the Great Depression. Cesar Chavez made the plight of mostly Latino farmworkers in the state a national issue.

Filipinos in the Central Valley? They’re largely ghosts in our collective memory.

An exhibition at the UC Santa Barbara Library could help change that. “Postcards from Salinas,” a collection of restored photos featuring Filipinos in the Salinas Valley, 1920-40, are on display on the first floor of the ocean side of the library.

Curated by Alex Fabros Jr., a retired historian of Asian American studies at San Francisco State University, the exhibit features postcards of Filipino men who sent them to relatives in the Philippines.

In conjunction with the exhibition, a virtual conversation about the history and contributions of Filipina/o Americans on the Central Coast will take place Wednesday, Oct. 20, at noon. The online event is free and open to the public.

Panelists will include Fabros, who earned a master’s in history from UCSB; Benjamin Zulueta, a lecturer in UCSB’s Department of Asian American Studies; and Grace Yeh, a professor of ethnic studies at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. Paul Spickard, a UCSB distinguished professor of history, will moderate the discussion.

“Alex Fabros is a national treasure,” Spickard said. “These postcards and his insightful commentary bring back to life these men and women and families — their

real lives and personalities, not some movie stereotype. See the exhibit. Get to know them. Their lives are important."

Gerard A. Colmenar, a campus librarian who led the effort to bring the exhibition to UCSB, noted that comments in the daily journal at the exhibit underscore "the invisibility of Filipinas/os as well as other communities of Asian and Pacific Descent. The comments show unawareness of the experiences of Filipinas/os in this region.

"That said," he added, "I am hopeful that this will change with the work of scholars and historians like Alex Fabros Jr. in curating exhibits and excavating what is hidden in the archives or what is missing. More stories still need to be written, told and presented."

"Postcards from Salinas" originally exhibited at the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas in 2018 during Filipino Heritage Month. The photos were taken by Narciso Bulosan Caliva, who was born in the Philippines in 1902. At 17 he left home to pick pineapples in Hawaii before moving to the Salinas Valley and opening a photography studio.

Filipino men, dressed smartly, sent the postcards to their families in the Philippines to convey their success in the U.S. Their messages were positive and usually didn't mention their many hardships.

"Thank you to the UCSB Library, especially to Alex Regan, Alana Beal, Jonathan Rissmeyer and Hannah Rael for putting together the exhibit," Colmenar said. "Thank you to Alex Fabros Jr. I encourage everyone to see the photographs and attend the virtual panel discussion."

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.