

## **Corrective Philippine-American War Plaque Unveiled in Minnesota State Capitol**

By Ken Meter

Philippine Ambassador Albert F. Del Rosario and Minnesota Lt. Governor Mae Schunk unveiled a corrective plaque in the Minnesota State Capitol Rotunda on February 4. The new plaque corrects historical inaccuracies and racist remarks concerning the Philippine-American War that had been cast in bronze on the Capitol wall for over 50 years.

"Yours was a labor of love and dedication that should motivate Filipinos everywhere," Ambassador Del Rosario told the Filipino community of Minnesota at the unveiling, the result of an eight-year campaign to correct a commemorative to Minnesota volunteer soldiers who fought in the Philippines 100 years ago.

Historian James Loewen, who featured the Philippine Study Group of Minnesota's (PSGM) campaign in his recent book, *Lies Across America*, added that "Your new plaque does the best job I know of, anywhere in America, of telling the truth about this unfortunate undertaking [the Philippine-American War]."

The old plaque, installed in 1948, "contains a number of demeaning remarks and inaccuracies," said Meg Layese, chair of PSGM. Minnesota soldiers who offered to fight against Spanish domination of the Philippines are honored on the plaque. However, after seeing light action in the battle of Manila on August 13, 1898—which ended the Spanish American War—the soldiers were ordered to continue their service in the Philippines for another year. Eventually they engaged in 20 battles against Filipinos—as part of a war that claimed over 600,000 Filipino lives.

The commemorative to the 13<sup>th</sup> Minnesota Regiment, however, credits the soldiers with fighting to "free the oppressed peoples of the Philippine Islands from the despotic rule of Spain." Further, although it lists all battles fought against Filipinos, the plaque implies these battles were fought against the Spanish, and fails to mention the long American occupation.

"It hurts us Filipinos that our history is being trivialized," Layese stated at the unveiling. "We needed this to be corrected so that we may be true to our history, and therefore be true to who we truly are—in our own eyes and in other people's eyes."

Filipinos also expressed concern about racially sensitive language in the old plaque. At one point, the plaque refers to former Philippine President and Generalissimo Emilio Aguinaldo as "Chief Aguinaldo," implying he was a tribal chief. Further, the plaque refers to the Filipino national army as "insurgents," as if they were rebels against U.S. authority, rather than an autonomous force struggling for independence who had been pushed aside by U.S. troops.

Lita Malicsi, a leader in the Minnesota community, added, "There is no better time than now to say, 'I am proud, I am truly proud to be a Filipino Minnesotan.' Filipinos have lived in Minnesota since 1907. We have been part of Minnesota's social and economic fabric long before the old plaque was erected. Through those years, many Filipinos have felt that our ancestors' quest for freedom and independence was belittled by language—language such as found on the plaque. All Minnesota children who have visited the Capitol and read the plaque have clearly been misinformed by the presentation on the wall of our very own official state building."

That 1948 plaque did not even fairly represent the views of the veterans themselves. As Kyle Ward, historian at Vincennes University pointed out, when the Philippine-American War broke out, the Minnesota soldiers started a letter-writing campaign back to their political leaders at home—an act was itself heroic. "These letters home called for an end to their duty in the Philippines. This new war was one which they had not signed up for and did not want to fight."

In fact, General McC. Reeve, former Colonel of the 13th Minnesota, wrote in 1899, "I deprecate this war, this slaughter of our own boys and of the Filipinos, because it seems to me that we are doing something that is contrary to our principles in the past."

Even Minnesota Governor John Lind, a Spanish-American veteran, echoed these sentiments even in the speech he gave to a public celebration on October 12, 1899, welcoming home the Minnesota soldiers he commanded. “The mission of the American volunteer soldier has come to an end [with this war]. For purposes of conquest he is unfit, for he carries a conscience as well as a gun.”

At the unveiling, Ambassador Del Rosario pointed out that the Filipinos' effort to become independent, and the revelation of the American soldiers' own disgust at waging a war of conquest, ultimately had positive consequences for the United States. "The bitter experience of the Philippine-American War ensured that the American people would not embrace imperialism as a pillar of their national policy. The volunteer soldiers of this state expressed strong views on this subject. Thanks to them and to many other Americans of conscience, the United States remained faithful to its democratic roots in its rise as a great world power. The Philippines was to be the first and the last major overseas U.S. colony."

State officials expressed great enthusiasm for the corrective plaque. Lt. Governor Mae Schunk said, "It's always important to fix our mistakes, especially when a public display gives out the wrong historical information. This new plaque is a story of responsibility, respect and recognition."

Minnesota Adjutant General Eugene Andreotti, head of the state's national guard who favored the correction, added, "I may be a general, but there is no way that I could have accomplished what they [PSGM] did in the amount of time they did."

By installing the plaque, Minnesota became the first state in the U.S. to correct a commemorative concerning the Philippine-American War. Similar concerns have been raised about memorials to the war in San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Springfield, Illinois.

"I hope that this action by the State of Minnesota can serve as a model for other states," said Michael Cullinane, Associate Director of the University of Wisconsin's Center for Southeast Asian Studies.

The new plaque is an 18" by 48" bronze casting, called "Unearthing History" by its sculptor, Anne Klefstad of Duluth. It depicts the revised historical account being uncovered from tropical foliage after years of obscurity.

Layese added of the plaque, "We should all be proud that our state, by making this correction, has proclaimed that truth dishonors no one."

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Ken Meter, a member of the Philippine Study Group of Minnesota since 1986, initiated the PSGM effort campaign to correct the 13<sup>th</sup> Minnesota commemorative plaque. A former journalist, he won the National Catholic Press Association award for human rights coverage in 1986 for his report on the rise of Corazon Aquino to the presidency of the Philippines. He serves as president of Crossroads Resource Center in Minneapolis.