

## RAMBLINGS - STEPPING BACK IN TIME AND SPACE

Over a week ago, we went to visit Lisa's brother Fidel and Linda in Palm Coast, Florida. We've done that a few times before. But this time, a side trip to nearby Orlando turned it into a step back into time.

It all started 37 years ago in late 1973 when we got sick and tired of the Marcos regime and martial law, and despite our earlier vows to stay in the motherland, we decided to get out by whatever means possible. Our venue was a treaty investor visa: invest in a business, set it up in the US, and then go. We became one of the franchises of an American, Jack Skaff, who was setting up overseas Philippine Mastercraft Outlets, selling furniture and hand-craft manufactured and sourced from various parts of the country. And he originally was from Florida.

The business didn't quite work out. Despite the capital we sunk in, after selling our house, and using other sources from the family, the US Embassy granted only Lisa her visa. Not to me, nor the two children. My mother-in-law and her sister (who had tourist visas) were to accompany Lisa and Jack to Florida to set up shop. The first 40-foot container shipment left, and by mid 1974, they flew to Orlando, Florida, where Disneyworld was just starting up. The store was in a north suburb known as Altamonte Springs. There was a new Mall called Interstate Mall, and Jack already rented space.



To help get the E-2 visa, we even had our franchise endorsed by the Philippine Trade Commission's Quiazon, shown above inking it with me, while Jack looks on.



The Philippine Mastercraft showroom in Makati, with Jack's wife Buffy posing with Lisa.

Fortunately, I was working for the local offices of Westinghouse, and they were sending me for training in Virginia. When I got there, I took a month's vacation to go to Florida and help out in the store. We left our two kids with my folks in Makati.

A month or so later when I got there, I noted that our store looked like a small version of Tesoro's, Makati.

Altamonte Springs was lovely. The new Interstate Mall looked very promising. Jack had set up Lisa and her folks in an apartment right across the street from the mall, and the row of apartments had an lake behind it, amidst all the orange groves. Since none of them could drive, Jack had deputized many of his friends to help them out.

It had been an altogether different experience running a retail store for me. Lisa and her ma, however, were not strangers, having had a pharmacy in the Philippines for many years. But having weekly meetings with the other store owners in the mall, and other group activities, was something new, not to mention the product line.



Google view of the present area. In 1974, there was only the Mall, apartments, highways, some buildings and orange groves.

From Palm Coast last week, we made that side trip to Orlando to meet with two 1959 high school classmates, Nito and Edlin of Crystal River. The halfway point was Orlando. And Altamonte Springs was on the way. They had invited us to overnight with them and go fishing in Nito's yacht. But we were short on time as our hosts also had lined up lots of social activities with all their friends.



The Mall structure was still there, but the entrance led to what was now a mere corridor leading to cheap dollar movie houses, shown below left. On the right below was what had been our store years ago. It was now an art store in liquidation. The black lettering on the facade in photo is what I superimposed to show what it had been then; as A&P brought vivid memories.







The store space that had been ours 36 years ago. Didn't seem to have changed.

Within 2 days after I arrived in 1974, there was a holdup at the adjoining A&P grocery. The cops came in with their guns drawn and there was a shootout. I saw one of the dead robbers sprawled on the floor, and I snapped pictures, then called the local

newspaper if they wanted to use my pictures. Unfortunately, my camera was loaded with slide film, Ektachrome, and they said they couldn't use it. Too bad I don't have that picture anymore.

But most of the other memories were not as traumatic. We befriended some Pinoy locals, and worked out some business sharing agreement with a seminarian and priest who were running a kiosk selling religious items in the corridor in front of our store. We rented a car for two weeks and drove to Miami to engage a lawyer. After he went through our documents and had a long telephone call to his contacts in Washington, he said I had a thick file there, and that with the money we had invested, the US Consul in the Philippines should have granted the treaty trader's visa to the entire family. He even said he could sue that consul on my behalf. I declined. But at the moment his advice was that we keep the business going, I go back to Manila, and in 6 months, he could get me and the two children our E-2 visas. I had no doubt he was that capable. Years later, we found out that he became the US Ambassador to the Vatican.

To make a long story short, we pulled up our stakes and went back to the Philippines by mid 1975. Lisa had stayed there a total of 6 months.

We lost many of our personal belongings, and a quite an amount of money. But not all was in vain, because in 1981, we teamed up again with Jack Skaff's Mastercraft, who this time, was part of the San Miguel Corp, setting up shop in LA. This time we were not investors but employees. Many friends were surprised why we were making this move at our age, nearly 40, with good jobs. But I especially wanted to prove that we could make it in the US this second time around.

By early 1982, we all, including the three children were in Los Angeles. Lisa was the "product specialist" in the store.



Left photo shows her sitting on one of the rattan sets. There were all sorts of clients that came to buy exotic Philippine furniture. At that time there were no Pier 1 import stores or other oriental chains. One client was

Muhammad Ali, who posed for a picture with the entire staff. Then there was a lady who insisted on loading (and tying down) a sofa on top of her Rolls Royce.

But we had to move on into our professions, and Lisa managed to convert and use her 1970 E-3 (professional) visa application. These struggles were a story in itself, but by 1984, she was a licensed pharmacist and I was a licensed professional engineer. We could start living the American dream.

Now, it has come full circle. As retirees back in the Philippines since 2006, our frequent visits to the US allow us to travel to new places we hadn't visited before. Next week, we go to Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Tetons with some college friends.

And last week's trip to Orlando really wasn't the first time. In 1991, we drove cross country from Los Angeles, and spent a couple of days in Disneyworld. Early on, we managed to contact some of our friends from 1974, specifically the seminarian (already a priest) whom we left some of our belongings and other mementos. But we couldn't locate them then. Now in this 2010 visit, we didn't care.



Orlando is much more developed now. Above is a view from the Interstate Highway towards the downtown area, with an impressive looking building. Obviously, however, the recession has taken it's toll because the photo, which I lifted off Google Earth, is entitled "The Unfinished Bldg".



The above building however is finished, even if upside down. I took this shot right after we had a long 3 hour lunch and tete-a-tete with the classmates below. This apparently is the facade of a parking lot structure near the "Ripleys Believe It Or Not" museum, right across the very popular Ming Court Restaurant where we met.



For my high school friends, that's Edlin & Vicky Torralba, Lisa & Danny Gil, and Viola & Nito Taboada, 51 years after we left high school.

Danny Gil, 27 Aug 2010