

## Memories Of Simara

Written by Minnie Festin Navato

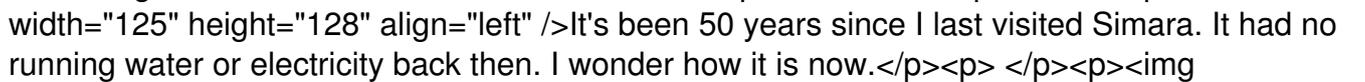
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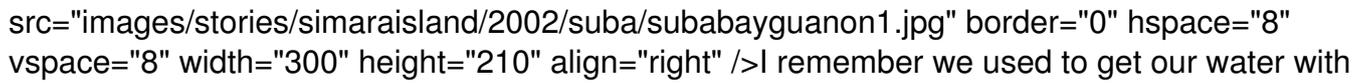
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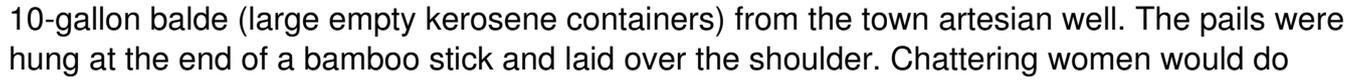
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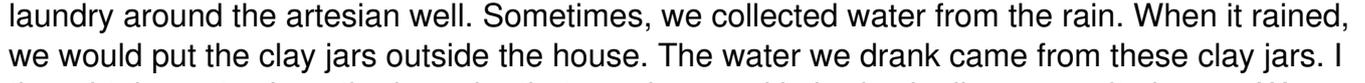
by Minnie Festin Navato

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 It's been 50 years since I last visited Simara. It had no running water or electricity back then. I wonder how it is now.

 I remember we used to get our water with 10-gallon balde (large empty kerosene containers) from the town artesian well. The pails were hung at the end of a bamboo stick and laid over the shoulder. Chattering women would do laundry around the artesian well. Sometimes, we collected water from the rain. When it rained, we would put the clay jars outside the house. The water we drank came from these clay jars. I thought the water from the large jar that we showered in had wriggling mosquito larvae. We scooped the water with tabo, a hallowed, half coconut shell with its meat removed and poured it on our body. We took baths in a separate nipa hut in the garden. The elevated floor was made of bamboo slats. Underneath the floor was the ground with large pebbles. The hut only had 3 complete walls. The 4th wall had a large opening which was covered with a curtain. Some of us would answer the call of nature in the garden during the day and in the orinola (chamber pot) at night. Sometimes, we ran across the town plaza to the isolated beach outhouse of the elementary school near our house. Even as a kid, I wondered where the grown-ups went for their necessities.

 The church was close by and Padre Remon was the parish priest. He would ring the church bells for angelus at 12 noon and at 6pm. That's how we set our clocks. Since there was no electricity, we used the alladin lamp and small oil wicker lamps. The household helper would pump the alladin lamp to make it brighter. The bright light would cast big, moving shadows of us on the walls. Before I went to bed, I would pick up a small burning oil lamp in the kitchen. Then, summoning all my courage, I would carefully and slowly find my way through dark rooms, making sure the lamp would not tilt over. Or, I would be shielding the lamp with one hand against sudden gusts of wind so it won't be snuffed out. The oil lamps would burn out during the night. Since the windows were not screened, it was impossible to sleep without a mosquito net. Because there was no power, the sky was beautiful at night. Many stars would twinkle brightly against the black sky. On a moonlit night, the sandy-white roads would be luminous. Some people would gather outside at night to swap stories because there was no TV.

 Tuba (coconut wine) was abundant because coconut trees were everywhere in the island. The buko (young coconut) and its juice was so delicious. During outdoor gatherings, one of the men would make a hole in the buko through which we drank the juice. Then, he would break the buko into halves with a bolo (machete). He would then fashion a spoon from the husk of the buko so we could scoop the meat. Coconut milk was used frequently in various food preparations. Sometimes, one could see a coconut drop from the tree spontaneously. Yet, I never heard of anybody getting hit by falling coconuts. There were lots of banana trees too. My grandmother, Mama Fesing Yap-Perez, would often use the banana heart as vegetable. The food was always fresh in Simara because there was no refrigerator. The soda was warm. So our household help would put the bottled soda in the ocean to cool it.

Our neighbor, Persing, would leave at 3am for fishing and come back in the

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afternoon with fresh fish. So we had fresh fish everyday. I seldom saw him because he would sleep when he arrived home. His wife would spread a banana leaf on the sand, lay the freshly-caught fish on the leaf and display them for sale. Since she owed money from my grandmother's store, she would hand-carry the fishes to us as payment for their debts. They were very poor.

Pigs and chickens were kept underneath the kitchen. I could easily see them through the flat bamboo slats of the kitchen floor. We often ate chicken and pork which was barbecued in a stick in an outdoor improvised barbecue pit. Pigs were slaughtered in backyards and I could hear a pig howling loudly for dear life just before it was slaughtered. I could tell it was dead when it stopped howling. The pig's forelegs were first tied together. Then the butcher, with one knee on the pig, would stab him in the neck all the way to the heart. Hot water will then be poured on the pig, I think, to soften the hair. Then the butcher used a very sharp knife to remove the outer layer of the skin of the pig. So, the black pig became very light flesh-colored.

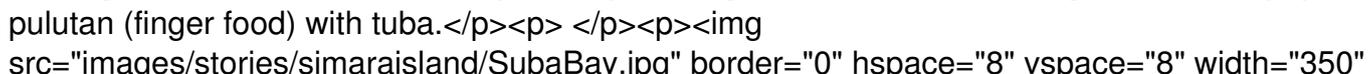
The chickens were killed by holding their head backward to expose the bottom side of their neck. Then the cook would pull off the short feathers from the neck. He would then tap the neck so the blood would rush to the neck. It was at this time that he would slit the neck. He would then hold the chicken with the legs up and the neck down to let the blood drain from the chicken into a saucer. After this, while holding the chicken's feet and wings, he dipped the chicken in boiling water momentarily to make it easy to hand-pluck the feathers. Then, he would cut the chicken in the belly lengthwise and pull out the internal organs like gizzard, liver, spleen, kidney and intestines. One had to be careful to minimize the fecal matter oozing out of the intestines. We kids always thought it was icky but our elders never seemed to mind it at all.

My mother's favorite book was Robinson Crusoe. So, she wanted us city kids to develop the skills of Robinson Crusoe so we could survive in the wilderness in case of war. My mother, Patring Perez-Festin, would have made us suitable candidates for the Survivor TV series. As my mother watched me dutifully pound the rice and thresh it afterwards, my brothers and sister were nowhere in sight.



The only mode of transportation was walking. There were about a couple of bicycles. Most of the people just walked because the island was not too large. There were only about 30-50 houses in a few blocks. One could smell the sea breeze all over the town of Poblacion, capital of Simara. On lazy afternoons, I would either tend my grandmother's sari-sari store or walk in the sandy dirt roads with no particular destination. I would hear the music of Sa Gulong ng Palad (Wheel of Fortune) and the voice of Eddie Ilarde of Kahapon Lamang from the battery-operated transistor radios. I felt eyes were on me as I strolled, probably because I was a visitor from Manila. There was a Simaranhon who enlisted in the US Navy and retired in Simara. With his pension, he opened the biggest store in Simara. I think that's where I saw the bicycles. In the town plaza, there was a big basketball court where the fiesta was held. My brother Arthur was a page to the beauty queen in one of the town fiestas.

Unlike the pampered dogs in the US, the thin dogs in Simara were cowed and running loose in the streets. They would always bark at the dog-eaters. So one could easily identify the dog-eaters of the town. Dog meat was a popular pulutan (finger food) with tuba.



To go to Ya-aw, we would walk over the hills for about an hour. A couple of us rode a horse on loan from the priest. It was a great privilege to ride a horse when most people just walked. Being a kid, I always rode with an adult. I wrapped my arms around

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the adult's waist tightly with the fingers of both hands locked together, as per my mother's instructions. Since I saw only three nipa huts in Ya-aw, I thought they were very few. I realize now that the other huts may have been scattered all over the place. I remember going to Mabini because we had land there. I would see this beautiful, placid lake on top of a hill on my trip to Mabini.



On a clear day, I could see the tip of Tablas from a strategic site on the beach. The beach was sandy-white with scattered, small rocks. Sometimes, if one was not careful, one could easily step on excrement. But the water was warm and clear. As I waded in the water, I could see my feet clearly at the bottom. I could also see the starfish, jellyfish, the broken shells, corals and the seaweeds clearly at the bottom of the water. There were small fish swimming around. At dusk, a few people would pick up snails, etc. for food. I was told that I could walk around the island in 3 hours.

Oh, I remember now this unexpectedly beautiful sight in the woods. Near the church, I climbed about 50 gleaming white stone steps up a hill to reach an imposing limestone-white look-out tower on top. It was built in the Spanish era so people could see the approaching, well-armed Moro vintas (sailboats) with colorful sails from a distance. This would give ample warning to the town folks to abandon their homes, ran to the hills and hide. I wonder if it is still there. My grandmother's house did not have ocean views. But it was nestled at the foot of the hill. For a city girl like me, the sight of the rising slope of the hill twenty feet from our second-floor window was refreshingly different.

We children used to play in the cemetery where human bones and skeletons were strewn on the ground. Surprisingly, we were not scared of the bones and skulls. Kids walked on their bare feet while we used Japanese rubber sandals. As a result, they ran faster than us. Life was peaceful and relaxing in the sleepy town of Poblacion. There was hardly any noise. The days were slow and there was little else to do. Night life was non-existent and people went to bed by 7-8pm. I never heard of any crime. I was told the town had a part-time school nurse who went around different islands, including Simara. Simara only had an elementary school. Students had to go elsewhere for a high school education.



Traveling to Simara by a small motorboat with katig (outriggers) on rough seas could make people seasick. I was just too scared to be seasick. People were throwing up around me while a few just slept through it all. My mother and Auntie Vering Albero-Lanzona would be nervously praying the rosary over and over again. I chose to sit beside the skipper and my heart would pound every time I saw these three-story-high waves coming towards us. But the boat would always ride on the crest of these waves. The skipper was patient as I frequently asked him "Are we there yet?" When the sea was calm and flat, the teenagers would be singing in the boat. This was also the time when I could see the fins of the shark sticking out and knifing through smooth, greenish-blue water. I didn't realize then that the sharks ate people.

The big inter-island ships could not dock in Simara because the waters were too shallow for the big ships to come close to the island. Once, a friendly captain of an inter-island ship kindly disembarked us in Simara, instead of Romblon. Since the sea all around the island was very shallow, the ship could not dock. So he blew the ship's booming horn several times until a baroto (canoe) from the town was paddled to the boat and carried us to the shore. The beach was milling with people and dogs when we landed. I felt like a visiting dignitary being met by a welcoming party. What a difference it made. Otherwise, we would have to go to Romblon town and wait a few days there to catch a

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3-hour motor boat ride to Simara.</p><p> </p><p>I hope I could go back to Simara someday. I hope I could visit my old stomping grounds again. I hope I could see that beautiful watch tower up in the hill one more time. I am sure Simara has changed a lot since I last saw it.</p><p></p><p><em>About the Author: Col. Herminia Perez Festin-Navato MD vacationed in Simara from age 7 - 10. She is now residing in a suburb of Boston, Massachusetts with her husband and three children.</em></p><p> </p><p><strong>Related Topics:</strong></p><ul><li><a href="#Top">Top </a></li></ul>