

*C.N.M.I. ARCHIVES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
FORMER MUNICIPALITY OF SAIPAN
BUILDING, CHALAN KANOA
VILLAGE*

Interviewee

*The Hon. Vicente T. Camacho
Speaker, Saipan Municipa Council*

Interviewer

Mr. Herbert S. Del Rosario

Date

June 16, 1998

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*Oral History Interview
Mr. Vicente T. Camacho
June 16, 1998*

Introduction: Good Afternoon, the date today is June 16, 1998. On behalf of the Northern Marianas College, the Historic Preservation Office and the U.S. Post Office, I take this opportunity to extend my sincerest appreciation to Mr. Vicente Taitingfong Camacho, for making his time possible to tell me a little about that building, the former Municipality of Saipan in Chalan Kanoa. I am very happy to start this interview.

Q: Mr. Camacho, can you tell me a little on what you remember back when Saipan was developing and what you remembered about the Municipal Office in Chalan Kanoa. Tell me a little of what you know about that place?

A: Okay, Mr. Rosario, Del Rosario. First of all here is how it is, since you are asking about the Municipal building on how it started. To begin with that building was built during the Japanese time for store and for all the workers who were working for the Kohatshu Company. Nanyo Kohatsu Kaisha, corporation of the Sugar Manufacturing, Sugar Factory, sugar cane, rather. So all those workers who were employed by N.K.K. were also members of the of the corporation. They were considered eligible to purchase any item at discount prices. So that was formerly a store. Then came World War II and the building was partially destroyed. They were mostly owned b the Japanese. The native islanders were put in Camp Susupe. The Okinawans were situated in a different

location, the Japanese were also in a different camp. The Americans were also situated our neighbor at the time. For us the natives, we were at Camp Susupe, since 1944 until sometime in August or September. I think it was organized in San Jose before being moved to Susupe. There were a few that were easily gathered by the Americans since the Americans were coming from the south at Agingan, Chalan Kanoa and there some that came in from the south where they entered and as they moved forward they were gathered, those that were alive. These people were put in the Oleai better known as San Jose where the Fitial's Family place. That was the first camp for the natives on island. Then as time went on the Japanese, the Americans built a place for the civilians who were alive. So then the Japanese, Okinawans and the Natives were, Natives means all those people who were in Saipan, be it Carolinian or Chamorro. Then the natives were moved to Susupe. If I am not mistaken towards the end of July, they were in Oleai then they were moved to Susupe. When they built the place, they fenced it for security purposes, to protect anyone from entering to disturbed the natives. Especially the ladies and the soldiers, it was necessary to have protection. During that time the people were attending mass in Susupe. So it lasted till December of 1944 and then they planned to move the natives down to Chalan Kanoa. It was then possible and the natives were moved south to Chalan Kanoa. At that time there were lots of Japanese built houses left standing that were given to the local people to stay. Those houses were repaired so that they may be occupied. At that time there was nothing to buy because the war

was just over and the food were all given out free by the military. This includes clothes and things necessary in life, all the services from the military. At that time the place called Kumpai (Store) was there too, what you just mentioned the building. They repaired that building and turned it into a Church. So that is where the people were attending mass.

Q: In Chalan Kanoa?

A: That's right in Chalan Kanoa. So from that time on, I remember from 1944, 1945, let's say December or January because if I am not mistaken the natives were moved in November or December . Then they fixed the church and made it the Catholic Church. So that was where the priest was celebrating mass. At that time there were also Altar Boys. So from that time, that was used as a church until the present Cathedral was completed. There also a lot of workers who helped in building the present Cathedral building at that time, our elders. I myself was involved in the construction of the present church during those days every Sundays and after work. We were collecting rocks and others, sand and others such as digging those that needed to be dug. They needed a lot of rocks. Then the people were going into the jungle to collect rocks. Then things moved on until the building was completed. In 1949 the construction of the church (Cathedral) was completed and that was the time they moved the Church. So the building that was formerly used by the church was used by the Municipality of Saipan in 1947 because that was the year the Municipality of Saipan started. That was probably the year the

order came from the United Nations, the Trusteeship Agreement. That was the year the United Nations became involved in our governmental affairs. It was the United Nations that was sort of responsible in our needs. Nowadays the United States, but the United Nations was only to supervise this area. The Security Council decided that we practice the type of governmental system in order to determined what kind of government we will get into. So from that time we took those studies to practice, we had our Congress, we had Commissioners, we established other groups to advanced ourselves. In 1958, no 1968, there was this big typhoon that hit Saipan called Typhoon Jean. Okay, the present Cathedral was already completed at that time. But that place was used by the Municipal. Then in 1968, a big typhoon, we needed the assistance of the United States because of the disaster that struck us. So there were lots of assistance from the United States and there was also assistance from Japan because former Mayor Sablan (Vicente) and I both speak Japanese. So we had good relations with Japan and that was how they came to assist our island and they would like to continue our relationship with them. Then they started sending people and students to assist in our recovery from the typhoon. I think the Japanese students spent three-months helping out our island. So they repaired the doors and the windows of the Municipal building that were destroyed by the typhoon. So those were all repaired, however they are only temporary. They did not turn the place into an office. The office of the Mayor was located to the East of the building. On the eastern part of road was also the dispensary during the Japanese Administration. The dispensary in

Chalan Kanoa was for those people who were staying in the Village of Chalan Kanoa. For those people who worked at the farm, the Sugar Factory is their housing area. So the hospital is located just East of the road. As time goes on the military, the federal government and the United Nations requested for our assistance. So assistance continued to come at a slow pace until they completed renovating the former Catholic Church. So my term started when I entered the Municipal Congress, Saipan Legislature former known as the Saipan Legislature, but when I worked during the Municipal a...a Saipan Congress....

Q: What year was that?

A: Sixty.....I am sorry it was 1959. It was 1959 when I started serving in the Municipality of Saipan, Saipan Congress. Then as time goes on the Mariana Islands District Legislature started.....then they separated those elected to the Mariana Islands District Legislature and their office was built in Susupe. Then they were moved to Susupe and the Municipality remained in Chalan Kanoa. So all those times the building was used by the Municipal Government. But when they started enacting Ordinances, that was when I came in and was elected Speaker. I was the head of the Congress but it was only on a temporary basis or better known as part time. No one was serving on a full time basis, not until I was elected. It was probably during our second termed, when an ordinance was passed, allowing all elected Speaker for the Congress to become a full-time member of that office. This Ordinance also authorizes the Speaker to receive full-time salary. So I was the First Speaker of the Saipan Municipal Legislature. Then as we moved on we produced the

Saipan Municipal Code. Then that was when the name changed to Saipan Legislature.

Q: Okay, from your recollection going back, is it correct then to say that all of the former Mayors of Saipan occupied that particular Office in Chalan Kanoa?

A: A...not all. On the eastern side, was the administration, now the western side was not used. There was an area that was used for storage, depository. But when I was elected Speaker, it then became a part of my responsibility. We immediately worked on rebuilding. Then we renovated the building to have two types of offices there. Then the second floor, because actually it was originally a one-story building, but when we decided to turn it into an office for the Municipal Council, Saipan Legislature but we were the Municipal Congress when the District Legislature moved out. Our people were also confused as to which Congressional Delegation to turn to. Then we repaired the top part of the building and turn the top part of the building into a Congressional Office, while the first floor was turned into the Mayor's Office. Then that was when the Mayor's Office moved into the First Floor. So the Mayor was on the bottom floor and it has the Administration, which included the Finance and the Statistical Offices and there was a legal office too. Maybe you remember that time, the legal service at the Municipal, the people working there were all Chamorros. Mr. Ben Gogue from Guam was working there and he was very helpful. Then they had the Legal Office, the Mayor's Office, Statistical Office. Do you remember Tun Antonion Apa (Mr. Antonio R. Guerrero). Then on the other side was the Finance Office. On top was the office of the Saipan Legislature. The Municipal

Congress. The back area was separated and turned into a Session or Meeting Hall.

Therefor the area was used as a meeting place for whatever meetings or gatherings. So then the back part was divided up between the Secretary and myself, the Speaker in the other room.

Q: Do you remember in the past, if I am not mistaken in 1959 and 1960, during the past during the July 4th or the United Nations Day, they used the.....

A: Right, but before that, one moment...before they repair that, they built the second floor, we were using the first floor for our meetings and there was no full-time Speaker at the time, not until the Speaker was there on a full-time, until I was elected. It was during my second term when we passed an Ordinance that all future elected Speaker be on a full-time basis and that includes a full-time salary. So I was the First Speaker of the Municipal Legislature. As time goes by we made the Municipal Code. That was when the name changed to Saipan Legislature.

Q: Okay, from your recollection did all the former Mayors of Saipan occupied that office?

A: A...not all. The eastern part was the Administration Office for the Mayor and the western area was nothing but storage or repository. But when I was elected Speaker, that fell into my responsibility. Then I immediately starting working to expand the place. We then tried to expand the place into two offices. Then the second floor, because it was originally a single story building, but when we decided to repair it for the Saipan Congressional Office on the second floor. But we were the Municipal Congress when the District Legislature moved

out. The people were confused on which Congress to refer to. However, the second floor was cemented half of the building on top to make it the Congressional Office and the first floor for the Mayor of Saipan. When the renovation was complete, that was when the Mayor's Office moved in. So the Mayor's Office was at the bottom area. The Administration, there was the Finance Office, the Statistical Office and there was also the Legal Office. You don't remember that time right. The Legal Services at the Municipal Office had Chamorros working there. Working there was Mr. Ben Gogue from Guam and was a very good man and helpful too. So we had one office for Legal, one for the Mayor, and the other office for statistics. Do you remember Tun Antonion Apa (Mr. Antonio R. Guerrero) next is the Finance Office. So then on top was the Office of the Saipan Legislature, The Municipal Congress, then on the back was the meeting hall. So whatever gatherings or hearings, they used that place for meetings. Then the back side was divided for the Secretary's Office and the Speaker's.

Q: Do you remember back maybe in 19 if I am not mistaken 59 and 60, whenever July 4th or the United Nations Day and they used that.....?

A: The.....yes a.....before.....one moment.....before they worked on the second story, I was using the bottom floor whenever we had meetings. At that time there was no full-time Speaker. Until there was the full-time Speaker, that was when they worked on..... Then from there on, from 1947....48 oh I am excuse me, 1949, 50, 51 on they used that place for meetings because there were times when the United Nations Visiting Mission would

visit. Our people were meeting with the Congress. I don't know if you remember when the U.S. Delegation visit our island. They were sent here by the late President Kennedy, the Salomon's Group. Whenever there are meetings, we meet with our people on the first floor and then as time goes on we repaired the second floor later on.

Q: One of the most important office at one time if I am not mistaken was the Marianas Political Status Commission?

A: That is right. Right.

Q: Did you also use that building?

A: That right. We also used that for our meeting at the Congressional Office.

Q: How long did you negotiated the Covenant?

A: I think during all the Negotiations until the end. The only time we changed was during the Signing Ceremony of the Covenant. They had the Ceremony at the Mount Carmel Auditorium because of its size and accessibility. At the Mount Carmel Auditorium no one will come in and disturb because it was in the school campus and everyone knew that majority of our people were Catholics, and that is why no one was hesitant to come and attend the ceremony. Mr. Ambassador Williams, the Chief Negotiator from Washington, he decided that if we wanted to have the Signing Ceremony elsewhere, but all the meetings and negotiations took place at the Saipan Legislative Office in Chalan Kanoa.

Q: The First Carolinian Affairs Office was there too right?

A: A.....

Q: The Carolinian Affairs when the CNMI Government came into effect?

A: Maybe, somewhere on the First Floor. Like I mentioned earlier the Office of the Mayor, the Legal Office and Finance including the Statistics Office. Somewhere in that place was where they had the Carolinian Affairs Office? They then ran out of space and they moved out to another location.

Q: Mr. Camacho, the Government of the Northern Marianas, when it leased the said property to the U.S. Post Office, your former office including that of the Mayor of Saipan, the Saipan Congress, High Council, Municipal Council, and the former Marianas Political Status Commission. That place and building has a lot of historical significance and the U.S. Post Office has plans to demolished that building in order for them to build and expand their facilities. What is your comment?

A: A.... I know that even though I will say something, maybe they will not follow or listen to me but this is only my opinion Mr. Del Rosario. Yes indeed, that place has historical significance, because it was primarily used by our people as a Church, secondly our local government office, and as I earlier mentioned, the Negotiation of the Covenant, and whatever disaster, a lot of people used that place for shelter. To be honest with you, I was touched and disturbed that they are going to destroy that building down. In fact the office that was there, the office of the mayor before they moved to the western part was also built by the Japanese, Japanese Hospital. It very much destroyed my thinking, it bothered me to see that the building is going to be destroyed. Asides from its historical significance,

what we are saying about our government, where the Covenant was negotiated, it strongly believe that the tourists, all the tourists that come and visit our islands and see these places will say that the building was built during the Japanese time. If they ask and were given complete information about the building, they will say that such building is being preserved, the place is building is still standing. I would like to see that all those buildings that have remained standing from during the past will be protected, instead of having them being destroyed, so that our people will find ways to make use of them and not destroy them. Now if for some reason they were destroyed by natural disasters or by the war, or the earthquake and the building is not safe, then it will not be necessary to break the place down. They can still repair it a little at the time, just like the Cathedral Church I Chalan Kanoa. When our church was built, the water was very salty because it was close to the sea. Even though the sand is dry, in order for the building to be strong, the water has to be salt less. The cement and the rebar especially if there is salt within it, it will make the rebar rust. That is what make breaks the concrete little by little. There are lots of houses with similar problems, but it does not necessary to break them. You just chip it down little by little. We are not going to tell them the engineering job, but but as we can see that is how things are done that can easily...It is easy to preserve that to see to it that the defects are fixed. But also leave the place as it is because of its significance to us.

Q: Thank you very much, is there anything else that you would like to tell us asides from

what you have told me?

A: The Post Office, its true as we can see that it is very congested. Especially there are times when it gets in our way whenever we go there to send or received mail. Sometimes we are in such a hurry and we cannot help it because there are lots of people lining up to pick up their mail or sent something or whatnot. I for one would like to see that the Post Office is expanded for our people's usage. But without breaking down the Old Municipal building. That place is big, you can and I tell you even if you ask someone to take a look at it, that building can still be preserved. If they want, they can use it without destroying the building. Let them leave the place for its historical value. We would like our children and their children to remember that it was that building that made us what we are today. Because that was the building where all the discussions and debates took place to make us Citizens of the United States today. So the place has a very big significance to us the people. I just wish that the building is left alone so that our future generations and put something outside the building has historical significance since once served as Catholics served our government on the life that we have today. Our rights before the United States. From my thinking, it would be nice if possible, for the public's opinion for us to petition to have that building preserved.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: That I hope that they preserved that instead of breaking it down.

Q: Thank you.