



A Historical Evaluation of The Emergence of Nueva Ecija as the Rice Granary of the Philippines

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Abstract: The recognition of Nueva Ecija's potential as a seedbed for rice in the latter half of the nineteenth century led to the massive conversion of public land and the establishment of agricultural estates in the province. The emergence of these estates signalled the arrival of wide scale commercial agriculture that revolved around wet-rice cultivation. By the 1920s, Nueva Ecija had become the "Rice Granary of the Philippines," which has been the identity of the province ever since.

This study is an assessment of the emergence of Nueva Ecija as the leading rice producer of the country. It also tackles various facets of the rice industry, the profitability of the crop and some issues that arose from rice being a controlled commodity. While circumstances might suggest that the rice producers would have enjoyed tremendous prosperity, it was not the case for the rice trade was in the hands of middlemen and regulated by the government. The government policy which favored the urban consumers over rice producers brought meager profits, which led to disappointment to all classes and ultimately caused social tension in the province. The study therefore also explains the conditions that made Nueva Ecija the hotbed of unrest prior to the Second World War.

Historical methodology was applied in the conduct of the study. Archival documents, periodicals and secondary sources from local and foreign libraries were utilized.

Key Words: Rice Production; Nueva Ecija; Social Unrest

Nueva Ecija is recognized as the "Rice Granary" of the Philippines because it led the production of the nation's food staple during the twentieth century. The province had not always been devoted to rice production and was in fact considered a frontier area throughout most of its history. It was only during the mid-nineteenth century when its vast alluvial plains drew immigrants from the Ilocos and Tagalog regions that cleared the woodlands that were later transformed into rice fields. (McLennan, 1955, p. 375) This was just the beginning, for in the decades that followed the province witnessed the emergence of landed estates devoted to planting the nation's staple crop.

The present study is a survey of the rise of Nueva Ecija as the foremost rice producing province. The objective is to provide a general description of

the province during the early twentieth century, narrate its emergence as the primary producer of rice in the Philippines, describe the rise of landholdings there, identify the big landowners and discuss other facets of the rice industry that affected the province.

PROVINCIAL FACTS AND FIGURES

Throughout most of the Spanish period, Nueva Ecija was geographically and politically part of Pampanga. Originally referred to as "Upper Pampanga," it was named Nueva Ecija when it was organized as a *comandancia* (military district) in 1705. It became a regular province in 1848. (McLennan, 1980, p. 176)

From the time of its founding in 1705 up to the turn of the twentieth century, the territorial borders of Nueva Ecija underwent a series of



revisions. By 1899, the province was described as follows,

Situated to the north of Manila, it is bounded on the north by Nueva Vizcaya, on the south by Bulacan, on the east by the Pacific Ocean, and on the west by Pampanga and Pangasinan. The area is 3,462 square miles, and the population 155,000. This province corresponds to the bishopric of Nueva Segovia . . . The province is divided into 22 pueblos, 87 barrios and visitas, and many Rancherías of infieles (infidels), who for the most part neither pay tribute nor have any relations with the Christian pueblos, so that their number is unknown.

The capital is San Isidro, with a population of 7,056. It is situated some 69 miles from Manila. (Otis, 1899, pp. 127-129)

Back then, the largest town was Gapan, with a population of 20,216 while the smallest was Puncan (now part of Carranglan), with a population of just 501. The other towns were Aliaga, Balungao, Bongabon, Cabanatuan, Cabiao, Carranglan, Cuyapo, Jaen, Lupao, Nampicuan, Peñaranda, Pantabangan, Rosales, San Antonio, San Jose, San Juan de Guimba, San Quintin, Santa Rosa, Santor, Talavera, Umingan and Zaragoza. (Otis, 1899)

In 1901 the municipalities of Umingan, Rosales, San Quintin and Balungao were transferred to Pangasinan, as part of an American administrative reorganization. (McLennan, 1955, p. 284) The authorized towns of the province that remained were Aliaga, Bongabon, Cabanatuan, Cabiao, Carranglan, Cuyapo, Gapan, Jaen, Licab, Lupao, Muñoz, Nampicuan, Pantabangan, Peñaranda, Rizal, San Antonio, San Isidro, San Jose, San Juan de Guimba, San Leonardo, Santa Rosa, Santo Domingo, Talavera and Zaragoza, which gave the province a total area of 551,789 hectares. (Bureau of Education, 1898-1945) By then, the borders of the province were defined as they are today.

Through the years, the municipalities of Gabaldon (formerly the Sabani Estate), General Mamerto Natividad, General Tinio (formerly Papaya), Laur, Llanera, Quezon and Talugtog, were founded. The municipalities of Cabanatuan, Gapan, San Jose and Muñoz were also later converted into component cities.

The provincial capital was San Isidro until it was moved to Cabanatuan in 1912 because of its central location and for being less subjected to

flooding during the rainy season. (Gleek, 1981, p. 26) Antonio G. Corpuz (1999) also explained that the transfer of provincial capitals from the traditional administrative centers to towns that were more “strategically-placed” along the railroad was a consequence of the pattern of economic growth in areas located along its lines. (p. 197) Such was the case of Cabanatuan where the primary train station in the province was located. Cabanatuan served as the provincial capital until 1965 when it was transferred to Palayan City.

In 1903, the population of the province was 134,147. It was estimated that of this number, 48 percent were Ilocano, 45 percent Tagalog, 6 percent Pampango and 1 percent Pangasinense, while Igorotes and Negritos were represented by a very small number. (Bureau of Education, 1898-1945)

Aside from internal growth, settlers from Pampanga, Bulacan, Ilocos and Pangasinan also immigrated during the years that followed which added to the population that reached 227,096 by 1918. The Census of the Philippines of 1939 indicated that the total population of the province had reached 416,762 by then. (Commission of the Census Commonwealth of the Philippines, 1939) The provincial population had therefore grown by almost 300 percent in the span of just around four decades.

BECOMING THE RICE GRANARY

There were several industries in Nueva Ecija during the Spanish era. In the southwest portion of the province, commercial agriculture was introduced by the government Tobacco Monopoly. Tobacco was grown along the banks of the Pampanga and Peñaranda Rivers until 1881 when the monopoly ended.

At that point, sugar and maize replaced tobacco as the favored crop. By 1886, sugar was recognized as the “crop in ascendancy” in the province. It was grown by the local principalia, but the bulk of production came from six Spanish-owned haciendas: four in Cabanatuan, one in Jaen and another in Cabiao. Although the province shipped sugar to Manila, the volume produced never rivalled that of Pampanga, Bulacan and Pangasinan. The soil of the province eventually proved to be incompatible to modern sugar cultivation so that cane production in the province practically disappeared by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century.

Central and Northern Nueva Ecija were devoted to livestock. Cattle, Carabao, horses and pigs were raised in small ranches by the provincial principalia, but large scale ranching was practiced in Spanish owned haciendas, the largest of which was

the six thousand hectare Sabani Estate. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the province was the main source of meat for the Manila market. (McLennan, 1980, pp. 67-68) In his report on the province, General Elwell S. Otis (1899) also noted that the principal industry of the province was cattle-raising. (p. 127) However, near the end of the century, rinderpest and foot-and-mouth epidemics struck and brought an end to large scale ranching in the province.

While Rice production was already a major industry at the time, it would eventually become the main industry of the province.

With an annual production ranging from 700,000 to 1,500,000 cavans between 1870 and 1887, the province exported around 500,000 cavans to Manila in the 1880s. By then it was already more than the export of Pampanga, which was traditionally the main supplier of the grain. Gapan and Aliaga led in the volume of rice production while Cabanatuan, Gapan and San Isidro served as the shipping points.

The province was sparsely populated until Ilocano pioneers started arriving in the 1840s followed by wealthy land speculators from Bulacan and Pampanga, and their workers towards the end of the nineteenth century. (McLennan, 1980, pp. 65-70) In the first decade of the 1900s, with the government policy of inducing migration to the eastern and northeastern parts of Luzon and the completion of the Bigaa, Bulacan to Cabanatuan, Nueva Ecija line of the Manila Railroad Company in 1905, more settlers from surrounding provinces flocked into the province. (Corpuz, 1999, pp. 179-180) In 1909 a railroad line from Paniqui, Tarlac through Nampicuan to Cuyapo, Nueva Ecija was opened which hastened the development of the towns located in the north western portion of the province. Aside from providing facilities for travel and communication, the significance of the railroad was the access it provided to the Manila market. (Sherard, 1911, p. 130) This encouraged the settlement and cultivation of tens of thousands of hectares of land in Nueva Ecija, which ultimately brought the dramatic increase in rice production. (Corpuz, 1999, 179)

By the end of the first decade, rice growing had become the main enterprise in the province and the harvest increased steadily from 1,600,000 cavans in 1909 to 1,900,000 cavans in 1910 and 2,153,718 cavans in 1911. (Bureau of Education) In 1911, the province was already the third largest producer of rice in the Islands. (Sherard, 1911, 179) The following year, the harvest increased furthermore and the crop was considered the largest in the

history of Nueva Ecija up to that time. (Bureau of Education, 1914-1945)

The trend continued that by 1917, Nueva Ecija produced 2,267,632 cavans of rice which was just slightly short of Pangasinan's 2,585,344. But in the same year, while Pangasinan was recognized as the leading rice producing province and was then still regarded the Islands' "granary," its 1,486,324 cavans of rice surplus was much lower than Nueva Ecija which had a surplus of 1,922,482 cavans. (Gleek, 1981, pp. 80-81)

In the years that followed, the inter-provincial export of Pangasinan continued to decrease which Percy Hill (1925) attributed to the rapidly increasing population of Pangasinan, as well as the little or lack of additional land to place under rice cultivation. Nueva Ecija on the other hand continued to have vast tracks of land to plant and because it consumed less than what it produced, was able to sell more to Manila and other provinces. (p. 20)

By 1920 Nueva Ecija had become the top rice producing province in the Philippines. Compared to Pangasinan, Nueva Ecija that year still had fewer cultivated areas but higher production, average production per hectare and total value. (Camus, 1921, p.13)

The large quantity of rice harvested in Nueva Ecija in 1921 led Percy A. Hill (August 1922) to proclaim that "the title of 'Granary of the Philippines' can no longer be applied to Pangasinan" for it was clear by then, that Nueva Ecija had overtaken Pangasinan's total rice production. (p. 24)

As pointed out earlier, one of the reasons for the higher rate of production in the province was its high average rice yield. Nueva Ecija's average yield that year was 42.22 cavans per hectare, while the average for the entire Philippines was only 24.79 cavans per hectare. (Hill, December 1922, p. 18)

By 1924, Cabanatuan alone exported 25,000 more sacks of rice per year than the entire province of Pangasinan. (Hill, 1924, p. 18) Cabanatuan served as the chief shipping point for inter-provincial rice movements while the two other shipping points in the province were Sta. Rosa and San Isidro. (Hill, 1923, p. 15) By then, the yield per hectare of Nueva Ecija was 44 cavans while Pangasinan's was only 33 cavans.

In 1929, with Nueva Ecija as the leading producer, Pangasinan, Tarlac, Iloilo and Pampanga produced half of the national crop. (Gleek, 1981, pp. 80-81) From 1933 to 1937, national rice production ranged from 42,219,600 to 55,015,730 cavans of rice per year. Of the total cavans produced annually, 16 to 20 percent was from Nueva Ecija. This is the



reason why the province was referred to as the “undisputed granary of the Philippines.” (Buencamino, 1938, p. 12-28) It is also worth noting that Nueva Ecija became the leader of the islands’ rice industry in a span of less than two generations.

By 1938, the province had 210,628 hectares of land devoted to rice which meant that almost half of the province’s total land area of 551,789 hectares was used for the planting of the crop. Of these lands, 47,680 hectares were irrigated and 162,948 were unirrigated. (Buencamino, 1939, p. 27) 312,000 persons or 93 percent of its total population of 335,700 depended on the rice industry. The province produced from 16 percent to 20 percent of the total palay production of the country and was recognized as the leader. Cabanatuan, the capital of the province, was the nerve center of the rice trade and the condition of its market reflected all over the country. Its prices dominated the rest that even the rice trade in Manila generally followed the movement of Cabanatuan prices. (Buencamino, 1938, pp. 27-28)

In 1939, Nueva Ecija produced 4,128,155 cavans of rice for sale to the market while its population consumed a mere 1,004,848 cavans. (Buencamino, 1940, p. 75) The province thus produced more than three times of all the rice it consumed. No other province in the Philippines boasted of as much surplus as Nueva Ecija’s by the end of the 1930s.

ORIGINS OF LANDED ESTATES

The high demand for the grain encouraged the formation of landholdings devoted to rice production in the province, most of which emerged only during the early part of the twentieth century. McLennan (1980) referred to the first two decades of the century as the period of “the most prolific expansion of *principalia*-owned rice haciendas ever to occur on the Central Luzon Plain.” (p. 70) These haciendas had various origins.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Nueva Ecija was still a sparsely populated area. It was at that time when Spanish colonials driven by the desire to profit from domestic resources, started acquiring estates that were eventually devoted to the cultivation of tobacco, sugar and rice; and the raising of livestock. These estates were acquired through royal land grants or by purchase from the royal domain. Immigrants from Pampanga and Bulacan later purchased some of these estates from the original Spanish grantees or also purchased land from the royal domain. (McLennan, 1980, p. 69) Among these estates were the Hacienda Esperanza and Sabani Estate, the largest in the province.

Other estates were formed through the assimilation of parcels of land acquired through the *pacto de retroventa*, a practice associated with Chinese *mestizos*. The *pacto de retroventa* was a mortgage that was actually a contract of sale with the right of repurchase at a stipulated price within a definite period. Failure to repurchase gave the moneylender full title to the land. (Allen, 1938, 62) What resulted was “a pattern of scattered holdings’ which made the Chinese *mestizos* the dominant element among medium and small landlords.” (McLennan, 1980, p. 69) They would later be recognized among the hacenderos of the province towards the end of the century.

Some estates originated from homesteads. Migrants came from neighboring provinces to apply for homesteads, made possible by the Public Land Act of 1903. The law provided that individuals could apply for homesteads of sixteen hectares while partnerships or corporations were allowed to apply for as much as one thousand twenty four hectares. (Putzel, 1992, p. 53)

At the time, “sizeable sections of public land could still be found in the Central Luzon Plain only in parts of the northern and eastern Nueva Ecija.” Despite the initial apathetic response homesteading received, an exodus of migrants eventually populated these areas. In 1911, it was estimated that over 1,000 immigrants from the provinces of Pangasinan, Ilocos Sur and Ilocos Norte had moved near the road between the towns of Guimba and San Jose. (Sherard, 1911, p. 137) Applications increased steadily and eventually, numerous homesteads were also established in the municipalities of Rizal, General Natividad, Llanera, Muñoz, San Jose, Bongabon, Laur, Santo Domingo, Guimba, Cuyapo and Talavera. (McLennan, 1980, 230-231)

The homesteaders dream was however not free from problems. There were instances of overlapping claims. (Baroman, 1987, p. 88) Some homesteads were too remote from the town proper and did not have access to basic necessities such as water. There were instances when farmers cleared the land as homesteads not knowing the legal necessity of filing a registration of landownership. Some simply did not have the money or were frustrated from pursuing registration due to the long and tedious process of doing so. (Camagay, 1993, p. 8) Also noted were the discourtesy and indifference of government personnel which left homesteaders “sulking and nursing grudges against the government.” (Torres, 1936, p. 3) Thus it was Gleeck (1981) observed,

But with all their love for the land
and their natural desire to possess it in fee

simple, they migrate none too rapidly into the regions of free lands where they may acquire homesteads from the United States (Insular) public domain. They are, many of them, indentured as peons and therefore not free to migrate; they are so poor in the chattels of this world that physically it is an impossibility for them to remove to fallow lands and forego a single crop, often as crops come in these islands; the lands inviting them have in frequent cases not been surveyed, and the title of the government determined in the courts, so that should they actually move onto these lands and put them under improvements, it might fall out in the end, as it so often has fallen out in the past, that in the final judgement of the case they would be deprived of their holdings. (p. 110)

He further explained that “after the great expansion of rice cultivation from 1917-1921, the easily accessible public lands were filled up.” The “frontier in Nueva Ecija was closed and (in Luzon) had shifted to Nueva Vizcaya and the upper Cagayan Valley.” Moreover,

Land values had risen steeply, so that if the poor, hardworking homesteader didn't emigrate, he tried to squat on public (but unavailable) land like the Bongabon Stock Farm or on disputed pieces of *hacendero* property, or on other homesteaders' land. The Twenties are replete with such incidents, and the fact that the *hacendero* or the Government generally won their cases often simply built up the pressure on the landseeker. . . (Gleek, 1981, p. 107)

After 1925, the homesteader problem in Nueva Ecija lost its “separate identity” as the homesteaders were “gradually co-opted into the sharpening class struggle between the landlords and the tenants.” While a few became landowners, most were absorbed into the tenantry. Homesteads were lost when the land was used as collateral for loans which were unpaid or through the *pacto de retroventa*. (Gleek, 1981, p. 110)

There were also plantations established by corporations through leasehold in the province such as the Puncan Plantation and the Vega-Chico Agricultural Company.

The Puncan Plantation was established on public land in Puncan, Carranglan, Nueva Ecija. It

was acquired through leasehold by a company in which C.S. Salmon was the principal stockholder. (“Developing a Rice Plantation”, 1930, p. 4) Established in 1919 and managed by Victor L. Tence, it engaged in large scale rice production in Nueva Ecija. Operations commenced in 1921 on an 877.9 hectare leased area. (Baroman, 1987, p. 89) Its area later grew to a thousand hectares. In 1929, the plantation was tenanted with 104 families mostly from Nueva Ecija and the neighboring provinces of Pangasinan, Tarlac and Ilocos Sur. The majority of the tenants were Ilocanos. (“Developing a Rice Plantation,” 1930, p. 4-6) According to Baroman (1987), the plantation ultimately failed due to the “feudal arrangement which was not congenial to the American temperament.” (p. 89)

Another American owned plantation established in Nueva Ecija was the Vega Chico Agricultural Company which had leasehold over an area of 224.8 hectares. Like the Puncan Plantation, it also eventually failed. (Baroman, 1987, p. 89-90)

Some of the agricultural estates in the province began as land claims made by the local *principales* or from nearby provinces, which converted public lands to private haciendas devoted to wet-rice cultivation. The *principales* who staked out a claim to ownership of the land, led forest clearance projects and recruited tenants “with the promise of free or nominal rent during the early years of occupancy in exchange for their clearing land designated by the would-be hacenderos.” The typical tenancy arrangement for the first settlers was the *inquilinato* or the lease system which was more often referred to as the *canon* system when it involved pioneering. In the 1920s, this system gave way to the *kasamá* system or sharecropping as “labour became more plentiful forest clearance came to an end.”

Among these *principales* and their land claims were: Don Mariano Garcia of Sitio Garcia in Santo Cristo, Gapan; in Talavera, Don Meliton Carlos of Sitio Tila Kaingin, Sitio Bakood and Barrio San Miguel na Munti; Don Gabriel Llamas of Barrio Tobacao, Sitio Bulak and Sitio Basanghamog; Juana Saranggaya of Sitio Saranggaya, and the Tinios of Barrio San Pascual and Barrio San Ricardo; In Cuyapo was Don Primitivo Versula of Barrio Medico (now Maeling); Vega, Bongabon which was cleared by several principalia; in Guimba, Kapitan Berong (aka Casimiro Tinio) of Barrio Ayo-Lumbay and Barrio Narvacan; Don Luis de Ocampo of Barrio Bantug and Barrio Catimon (formerly Turoid); Don Francisco Gonzalez of Barrio Casongsong and Barrio Manggang Marikit; and the hacendero of Barrio Agcano.



The competition for land was so fierce that “sometimes the land claims made in association with clearing activities led to armed conflicts between tenants of two hacenderos or between the occupants of a hacienda and the inhabitants of nearby *poblacions* or barrios in a manner somewhat reminiscent of the range wars of the American Far West.” (McLennan, 1980, 218-220) The emergence of the landed estates in Nueva Ecija thus involved more than just sweat and tears, for blood was also shed in the process.

McLennan (1980) summed up the story of the emergence of haciendas in Nueva Ecija as follows,

We can safely generalize, nevertheless, that the approximate period 1890 and 1925 saw the bulk of the principalia-owned haciendas established or expanded at the expense of the public domain and small holder neighbors. The period of maturation from 1925 to the outbreak of war in 1941 was used to develop the full potential of the haciendas laid out during the previous period of expansion. The earlier stage saw the hacenderos directing inquilinos in forest felling, the succeeding period was one of converting tenancy arrangements sharecropping and evolving secondary sources of income by extending credit to tenants, introducing threshers, trucks, warehouses and, in some cases, rice mills, for which services the peasants were charged. (p. 218)

THE BIG LANDLORDS

While the Gonzalez, Tinio, Tabaquin, and Esquerria families already established themselves as elites in Nueva Ecija during the nineteenth century, many of the prominent modern *principalia* appeared on the scene only in the twentieth century. Some of them formed alliances usually by marriage, such as the Tinio, Natividad, Gabaldon, Matias and Ramoso families. Another web of family alliances included the de Santos, Ongsiako, de los Reyes, Alzate, Barcelona, Moreno, Gallego and Viola families.

Among the elites of Nueva Ecija were nonresidents of the province. Jose de Leon who was linked by his wife to the Buencamino family was from San Miguel, Bulacan. Others from San Miguel were Maximo Viola, Meliton Carlos and the Tanjancos. There were those from Malolos, Bulacan such as Estefania del Rosario and Nicanor Jacinto. Other important nonresident elites were the Belmote and Cojuangco families, the latter based in Tarlac.

Americans who tried to establish haciendas in the province were Percy Hill and the earlier mentioned C.S. Salmon of the Puncan Plantation. (McLennan, 1980, 213-215)

In 1930, *The American Chamber of Commerce Journal* published a list of owners of plantations of 500 hectares or more in the provinces. The list indicated the following as the owners of such landholdings in Nueva Ecija: Simplicio del Rosario (Manila), Heirs of Marcelino Santos and Lucio Ongsiaco (Manila), Ira L. David (Guimba), Feliciano Ramoso (Guimba), Lucia Vda. De Tinio-Administrator of the Heirs of C. Tinio (Cabanatuan), Angel C. Tinio- Administrator of the Heirs of C. Tinio (Cabanatuan), Trinidad T. de Ramoso- Administrator of the Heirs of C. Tinio (Guimba), Dionisio Solis Galson (Bautista, Pangasinan), Maximo Viola (San Miguel, Bulacan), Philippine National Development Company (Manila), Bernarda T. de Gabaldon (Quezon), Jose de Leon (San Miguel, Bulacan), Estefania del Rosario (Malolos, Bulacan), Tecla Chicioco (Paniqui, Tarlac), Leon Sangco-Administrator of Hermogenes Romero (Zaragoza). (“Owners of Plantations of 500 Hectares or More Listed by Provinces,” 1930, p. 10) The majority of the big landowners of the province were apparently absentee-landlords.

ILLUSION OF PROSPERITY

Rice production in the province increased by more than 250 percent in the span of just three decades (1909 to 1939) driven by a very strong local demand for the grain. Several reasons explain this phenomenon. First was the insufficient local rice production which made the importation of the grain a necessity since the 1880s. Second, the national population was also growing which explains the insatiable demand for the food staple. Last, vast tracks of agricultural land in other provinces were converted from rice fields into plantations for export crops such as copra, abaca and sugar during that period, in response to the increased international demand for such crops after the First World War. (Allen, 1938, pp. 53-55) This scenario amplified the demand for rice in provinces producing export crops. Other provinces thus profited from tariff-free trade with the United States while rice farmers of Nueva Ecija earned their living by satisfying the local market.

The circumstances may suggest that the rice producers of the province would have enjoyed tremendous prosperity but this was not the case. In fact, the period has been referred to as “a period of starvation amidst plenty.” (“Jones Stops Payment on



Rice Import, 1935/ "The Peasant War in the Philippines," 1946, p. 391)

One reason was the tremendous difference between the prices given the rice growers and the prices in the markets- as much as two pesos a sack and sometimes even more, a situation attributed to the manipulation by middlemen and rice merchants. It was also noted that "prices fluctuated greatly from season to season and from month to month, with the consumer and small producer completely at the mercy of the weather and the middlemen." (Houston, 1953, p. 24) Leon Ma. Guerrero thus noted in 1938,

"The price of rice is not a figure for the statistical reports, but a matter of life and death."

"If the price of rice goes up, 14,000,000 people know it. They have to pay more for life, they go hungry to bed or school."

"If the price of rice goes down, then 4,000,000 landowners, tenants and ricemill laborers face ruin. Landowners tighten up on credit, and the tenant goes deeper into debt.

"If the price goes up, hunger."

"If the price goes down, revolution."

"Of all Filipino industries, rice is the most important in terms of life." (Gleuck, 1981, p. xv)

A similar opinion was expressed in the column "The Rice Farmer" of the Herald, which conveyed a cynical view of the industry. The author wrote,

It is the misfortune of the rice producer that the stomach of the people is the regulator of the business. To speculate on that stomach is a highly dangerous venture. The copra manufacturer, the hemp planter, the sugar hacenderos may speculate all they want, but never the planter of rice.

The nation rejoices when copra, hemp and sugar prices are high; to the nation, if Providence grants it, the sky is the limit when it comes to the prices of these speculative crops. But in the matter of rice- the food of the public Minotaur- the limit is the common earth. ("The Rice Farmer," 1935)

The statement reveals an aspect of the rice industry that seems to have been generally ignored. That is, as the provider of the nation's food staple

there was a deemed ethical dimension to its existence. Because rice was considered a necessity, its commerce was believed to be "a matter of life and death." For this reason market forces were not allowed to govern the industry completely and the trade of rice was regulated by the government despite opposition from various sectors. The policy favored the urban consumers rather than the rice producers which consequently led to meager profits for the producers, in an industry that seemed to be booming. (Hill, June 1925, 20) In a confidential memorandum to the Governor General, E. D. Hester (1935) expressed his belief that the outcry over high prices of rice were "purely political" and thus advised that "the entire program of the control of the rice price be abandoned." His advice however was not heeded.

This scenario affected the landowners and their tenants. By the mid 1930s, on one hand were the wealthy landowners and on the other were poor farmers who worked for a share of the harvest. While landlords were able bear the low profit from rice production, the tilling class had difficulty making ends meet. The situation in Nueva Ecija eventually led to the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few while the majority of the people suffered in abject poverty.

CONCLUSION

The recognition of Nueva Ecija's potential as a seedbed for rice production in the nineteenth century brought the elite led establishment of agricultural estates in the province. What transpired at the turn of the twentieth century was the massive conversion of public land into private haciendas which also signalled the arrival of wide scale commercial agriculture that revolved around wet-rice cultivation in the province.

The availability of vast tracks of land ready for cultivation as rice fields, a large population of rice farmers and the managerial elite who took the task of managing rice cultivation paved the way for Nueva Ecija to become the nation's granary. By 1921 Nueva Ecija became the nation's top rice producer. The province thus emerged as the leading rice producer in less than two generations.

But while circumstances suggest that the rice producers of the province enjoyed prosperity, it was not the case for the rice trade was in the hands of middlemen and regulated by the government. The government policy which favored the urban consumers over rice producers brought meager profits, which led to disappointment and ultimately caused social tension in the province.



Thus, with the rapid rise of Nueva Ecija as an economic giant among Philippine provinces came social realities borne by economic progress that turned out to be replete with suffering, tension and conflict for the tilling class. The reality was that as early as the mid 1920s, it was already common knowledge that there was something wrong in Nueva Ecija. (Hill, May 1924, p. 19) These conditions took their toll on the people of the province and later led to social upheavals that lasted throughout the twentieth century.

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