



The Veterinary Career of *Victor Buencamino*: *The First Filipino Animal Doctor, 1911-1935*

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Abstract: Dr. Victor Buencamino is an important figure in Philippine veterinary history. He was the first Filipino to earn the degree of Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. After finishing his Veterinary Medicine degree at Cornell University in 1911, Buencamino returned to the Philippines and was appointed as the first Filipino veterinarian in the American-dominated veterinary force of the Bureau of Agriculture. By May 1912, he taught at the University of the Philippine College of Veterinary Science where he contributed significantly to the veterinary medical course. In 1933, Buencamino was appointed head of the Bureau of Animal Industry making him its first Filipino director. This paper is a descriptive-analytical study that traces the veterinary career of Victor Buencamino, the first Filipino veterinarian of the Philippines. In this research, I shall discuss the different challenges that Buencamino faced as the first Filipino veterinarian in the American colonial bureaucracy particularly in the campaign against the spread of animal contagions in the Philippines during the early twentieth century. I shall endeavor to explain how Buencamino analyzed the problems that beset the veterinary campaign against epizootics and the low regard to veterinarians in the Philippines during the American period. I shall also explain the legacy and contributions of Dr. Buencamino to the development of veterinary medicine in the Philippines. In this study, I utilized primary sources namely the *Memoir of Victor Buencamino*(1977), *The Philippine Agricultural Review*, the official journal of the Bureau of Agriculture, and the different government documents written by American colonial officials.

Key Words: Veterinary medicine; Veterinary Science; Animal contagion; Victor Buencamino; Filipino veterinarian

1. State of colonial veterinary medicine in the Philippines during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

Veterinary medicine was still at its infancy stage in the nineteenth century Spanish colonial Philippines. There was no veterinary training school nor any civilian veterinarian in the Philippines at that time and so all the veterinarians employed by the colonial government in the Philippines came from the Spanish army. Known as the Spanish veterinary corps, this veterinary force under the Spanish army service was tasked to control infectious animal diseases in the

Philippines. It was mandated to preserve the health of animals, treat animal contagions, conduct meat inspection in the *matadero* or slaughterhouse of Manila, serve as *policia sanitaria* or sanitary police and train cavalry animals (Ferriols, 1957). The high mortality of bovine animals due to the plague alarmed the people and the Spanish colonial state. As a response to the problem, colonial officials informed the people on the necessary treatment against the disease (Bureau of Agriculture, 1910; Philippine Commission, 1904; Ferriols, 1957).

Even after the United States formally annexed the Philippines in 1898, animal contagions, particularly bovine diseases like cattle plague or rinderpest, foot-and-mouth disease, and anthrax continued to ravage



the carabaos and cattle population in the country. Since there was not single Filipino veterinarian at that time, the colonial government employed American veterinarians. Unfortunately, the Bureau of Agriculture, the principal agency tasked to lead the animal disease control campaign, did not have a sufficient number of American veterinarians in the veterinary service. Foreign veterinarians employed by the American colonial government in the Philippines did not stay longer than three years because most of them immediately returned home after their contracts have expired. (Philippine Veterinary Medical Association, 1941; Gomez, 1935). The Agriculture Bureau also observed that the absence of a Filipino veterinarian in the colonial veterinary force made it more difficult for the insular government to effectively communicate with the public its policies against the epizootics (Philippine Commission, 1905; Philippine Commission, 1910; Sumulong, 1936; Gomez, 1948). Because of the scarcity of veterinarians in the Philippines, colonial officials confessed that they could not immediately respond to the widespread incidence of epizootics in the Philippines (Bureau of Agriculture, 1909). Due to the problems faced by the veterinary service in the Philippines, the young Victor Buencamino accepted the challenge to study veterinary medicine in the United States and become the country's first Filipino veterinarian.

2. Buencamino: The First Filipino Veterinarian in the Philippines

2.1 Buencamino's odyssey to Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine

Victor Abreu Buencamino was born on February 15, 1888 at Segunto Street (later called Sto. Cristo), Tondo, Manila. He was the son of Felipe Siojo Buencamino, Sr., Aguinaldo's secretary of Foreign Affairs and one of the founders of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, to his second wife Guadalupe Salazar Abreu. He studied in a private tutoring school under Maestrong Tupas.

With the connection of his father to the Americans, Victor and his brother Philip left the Philippines in October 1900 and stayed in the United States until 1905. While in California, USA, Buencamino and his brother studied in a boarding school for boys that was owned by Mr. Harry Boone, Sr. It was there where they learned to speak English and studied "regular courses in high school" (Buencamino, 1977, 35). In 1906, he enrolled at the University of California to study college. Unfortunately, in the spring of that same year, Buencamino's to study college was thwarted by the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake. He eventually returned to the Philippines and worked as a hog inspector at the Bureau of Agriculture. As hog inspector, Buencamino ensured that all "hogs brought in by provincial suppliers were fit to be slaughtered for human consumption" (Buencamino, 1977, p. 69). After his stint as swine inspector, Buencamino became the private clerk of Dr. George Nesom, director of the Bureau of Agriculture. Prompted by the epizootics problem and the lack of veterinarians in the country, Nesom advised the young Buencamino to return to the United States and pursue a degree in Veterinary Medicine. In his memoir, Buencamino (1977, p.72) remembers how Mr. Nesom offered him to study veterinary medicine:

Back in Manila after a few weeks, Dr. Nesom called me in one day for a chat. "Victor," he said, "your country has a really serious problem. The rinderpest plague is killing many of your animals. Without them your people will starve. And there's not even one Filipino veterinarian available. So why don't you go back to the States and study to become a vet?"

Buencamino's exposure to the rinderpest campaign of the Bureau of Agriculture made Nesom's advice "more and more attractive with each passing day." His documentation work at the Serum Laboratory of the Bureau of Agriculture also inspired him "to save the animal population of the land" (Buencamino, 1977, p. 73).

2.2 The First Filipino Vet joins the campaign against epizootics



On August 13, 1908, Buencamino went to Cornell University with letters of recommendation from Governor-General James Smith and Dr. Nesom. With strong recommendations from American colonial officials in the Philippines, Buencamino successfully entered the veterinary college at Cornell University. In his memoir, Buencamino writes that he was not a *pensionado* or Filipino government scholar. To finance his studies, he received money from his family in the Philippines and took extra jobs as well.

In 1911, Buencamino graduated from Cornell University with the degree of Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. A month after graduation, he took the US Civil Service Exam so that he can practice veterinary medicine in the Philippines. On Christmas eve of 1911, Dr. Buencamino arrived in the Philippines. After which, he was appointed as the first Filipino veterinarian in the American-led Bureau of Agriculture (Buencamino, 1977)

2.3 The Challenges Besetting the Campaign against epizootics

When Dr. Buencamino joined the veterinary service as head of a quarantine task force in Tarlac, he observed that the biggest problem of the colonial government in the campaign against animal contagions was how to properly communicate the stringent measures to the Filipinos (Buencamino, 1977, 107). Buencamino (1977) observes that the Filipino farmers vehemently opposed the strict quarantine measures and the animal inoculation implemented by the Bureau of Agriculture because colonial officials did not explain the importance of the policies to the Filipinos.

2.3.1 Quarantine Measures

Under Act No. 2172, the Philippine Commission (1912) empowered the Director of Agriculture to place under quarantine any province, island, municipality, barrio, township, settlement, parcel of land or district of whatever size if the area was determined to have been infected by an infectious animal disease. The Act empowered the Director of Agriculture to isolate

infected animals and to place them in quarantine stations. On the other hand, he was also authorized to declare any place to be free from infection and establish lines or districts for the protection of animals that were not infected by any animal disease. The Act also prohibited all persons, railroad company employees, owners or masters of any steam or sailing vessel or boat in any place declared under quarantine to receive or to deliver for transport or transportation from and to any quarantined province, island, municipality, barrio, parcel of land, or district any domestic animal without the written permission of the Director of Agriculture.

The Agriculture Bureau sought the assistance of the Philippine Scouts and the Philippine Constabulary to implement the quarantine measures. The Philippine Scout, a military organization of the United States Army created in 1901, inspected provinces and towns placed under animal quarantine. It also acted as quarantine guards to ensure that only authorized personnel from the Bureau of Agriculture entered the isolation corrals (Reardon, 1913). On the other hand, the Philippine Constabulary or the insular police force was assigned to check "quarantine lines until the Philippine Scouts could be made available" (Bureau of Agriculture, 1913). Major-General Franklin Bell, Commanding General of the Philippine Division, assigned the general supervision of the Scouts for quarantine duty. On June 30, 1912, the Bureau of Agriculture was assisted by 30 officers and 1,390 enlisted men belonging to the Fifth, Seventh, and Ninth Battalions of the Philippine Scouts as well as six officers and 147 enlisted men of the Philippine Constabulary (Philippine Commission, 1912; Ward, 1912).

Quarantine policies developed antagonistic reactions from both the public and local officials (Elliott, 1968). For many Filipino livestock owners, quarantine altered their regular routine because farmers who used to pasture their animals during the day and allowed their animals to move and mingle freely after work, were disallowed. Many Filipino farmers even considered the quarantine measures as worse than



the disease itself because it separated them from their livestock. Consequently, many farmers brought their animals to the mountains and hid them from the government's search teams. In other districts, farmers submitted their animals for quarantine but asked for work passes during the night in order to pasture them (Decker, 1913; Tecson, 1908; Youngberg, 1917). The Bureau of Agriculture threatened farmers of heavy fines and penalties to prevent farmers from transferring animals from the quarantine stations to their farmlands. While this was meant to discourage them, many Filipino farmers risked the heavy penalties just to check on the conditions of their beloved animals (Jardiano, 1937).

2.3.2 Animal inoculation

Many Filipino farmers also opposed and resented the animal inoculation campaign of the Bureau of Agriculture. Introduced by the Bureau of Agriculture in the latter part of 1902, susceptible animals are inoculated with a serum that was extracted from the blood of an animal that had been infected with the rinderpest virus but had fully recovered (Kern, 1922; Topacio, 1922). The Serum Laboratory manufactured the rinderpest serum (Buencamino, 1977, Kern, 1922, Topacio, 1922).

When the inoculation method was introduced, many Filipino farmers did not cooperate. They expected the American veterinarians and inoculators to give medicine to their sick carabaos or cattle. However, they were stunned when they saw veterinarians injecting into their animals blood from a sick animal. Many Filipino farmers got angry with the American veterinarians because many animals died after the inoculation. The mortality rate after the inoculation was as high as fifty percent (Philippine Commission, 1905; Sullivan, 1992). As a result, "many cases of violence, of farmers chasing government veterinarians away with bolos" was common (Buencamino, 1977, pp. 107-108).

2.3.3 Analyzing the Filipino sentiments to the American Campaign against animal contagions

Buencamino examined the roots of the Filipino antagonism to the American campaign. As a Filipino, he understood the importance of the carabao or water buffalo to the Filipino farmers. This was something that the American veterinarians could not understand. The carabao is the most important farm animal in the Philippines. In fact, many Filipinos consider the carabao as the symbol of Philippine agricultural life. Even Buencamino (1977, p. 107) believed that the carabao was "life itself" because it pulled the farmer's "plow in the field, carried his harvest on its back, [and] provided milk." It "was so precious it was usually kept in a comfortable area under his nipa hut and cared for like it was a member of the family."

The negative reaction of Filipino farmers on the policies and programs of the colonial government to control the epizootics was to be expected. Buencamino (1977, p. 107) explains the rationale for the opposition of the Filipino farmer to the colonial policies of the government in this manner:

[When] government men were taking his carabao away and confining it in a roofless corral with strange animals of other farmers and given strange medicine that was known to have killed more than cured. And on top of it all, the poor farmer had to lug his carabao feed over his own shoulders all the way to the quarantine site. Naturally the farmer rebelled against this.

To solve the problem, Buencamino (1977, p. 106) provided an excellent suggestion to address the Filipino opposition to the government measures.

Urgent need for communicating with the farmers, for informing them about the critical measures that had to be taken. Much of this communication gap could much more easily be bridged if there were more Filipinos with technical skills available... [Unfortunately] there was not even one Filipino veterinarian!

Buencamino reiterated the need to increase the number of Filipino veterinarians in the Philippines. This can help augment the dwindling and



unknowledgeable American veterinary forces who led the campaign against epizootics.

3. Buencamino: First Filipino Professor at the UP College of Veterinary Science, 1912- 1920

3.1 The early years of the Veterinary College

The American colonial government tried its best to recruit more American veterinarians to work in the Philippines by offering enticing salaries to those willing to accept appointments and work in the Philippines. Unfortunately, the number of American veterinarians willing to work in the Philippines was not enough to fill-in the huge demand for veterinary experts in the Philippines (Ferriols, 1929). It became more difficult for the colonial government to recruit American veterinarians to work in the Philippines because the implementation of the Meat Inspection Act of 1906 opened better opportunities for work in the United States (San Agustin, 1936; Philippine Commission, 1908; Ferriols, 1929).

To address the problem of securing competent veterinarians, Dean C. Worcester, Secretary of the Interior, recommended in 1907 the establishment of a veterinary school in the Philippines (Worcester, 1930; Philippine Commission 1908). The efforts of Secretary Worcester and Dr. Archibald Ward, chief veterinarian of the Bureau of Agriculture, bore fruit with the establishment of the College of Veterinary Science together with six other colleges of the University of the Philippines (Ferriols, 1929). Act No. 1870 or *An Act for the Purpose of Founding a University for the Philippine islands, Giving it Corporate Existence, Providing for a Board of regents, Defining the Board's responsibilities and Duties, Providing Higher and professional Instruction, and for other purposes*, enacted in a special session of the Philippine Legislature on June 18, 1908, provided for the creation of the University of the Philippines with seven initial colleges, namely, the College of Veterinary Science, the College of Philosophy, Science, and Letters, the College of Law, Social and

Political Science, the College of Medicine and Surgery, the College of Engineering, the College of Mines, the College of Agriculture and the School of Fine Arts. (Manuel, et.al, 2002). The College of Veterinary Science was established to train and develop a body of competent and professional veterinarians to control and eradicate animal contagions and give advice to livestock owners on animal diseases (San Agustin, 1936; Boynton, 1915).

When classes formally started in June 1910, construction of the buildings of the Veterinary College had not yet been completed. Hence, classes were temporarily conducted in a space available at the Philippine Medical School compound in Calle Herran (Broerman, 1911). While waiting for the construction of building, classes were also held in the premises of the Philippine Normal School. It was only in 1912 when the Veterinary College buildings were finally finished (Bernardo, 2007). The College of Veterinary Science maintained an animal clinic located between Rizal Avenue and Calle Tayuman. It was inaugurated on November 14, 1912 by Dr. Archibald Ward, Dean of the College of Veterinary Science.

The faculty roster of the College was made up of personnel from the Bureau of Agriculture and faculty members from the College of Medicine and Surgery and the College of Liberal Arts. On March 16, 1910, the Board of Regents appointed Dr. Archibald Ward, Chief Veterinarian of the Bureau of Agriculture, as Acting Dean of the College. Aside from serving as acting dean of the college, he also taught Preventive Veterinary Medicine (Sumulong, 1936). A year after classes opened, other instructors were appointed to teach at the College of Veterinary Science. In May of the following year, Dr. Buencamino was "pulled out from field duty and named instructor at the college" (Buencamino (1977, p. 110). He was appointed Instructor in Veterinary Surgery and since he was the one and only Filipino veterinarian in the Philippines, he was tasked to "develop a course at the College of Veterinary Science at the University of the Philippines" (Buencamino, 1977, p.110). A year after, he formally transferred to the College as full time professor. Three years later, his appointment as



associate professor of Veterinary Surgery on full time basis was changed to associate professor on part time basis with the privilege of private practice.

3.2 Challenges to the Veterinary Education in the Philippines during the early American period

The College of Veterinary Science provided scholarships to deserving Filipino students. However while there were a number of scholarship grants available, very few of these were actually put to good use. The reason for this was because of the low number of student enrollees who wanted to take up the veterinary science course. For academic year 1911-1912, there were only 11 first year students and 3 advanced students who enlisted for the course (Philippine Census Office, 1921).

The small number of enrollees was not the only the problem of the college. The small number of graduates also proved to be unsatisfactory. Many of the freshmen students who enrolled in the College did not pursue the entire five-year program. Hence, there were very few students who actually completed the course. The lack interest among students to pursue veterinary medicine can be attributed to the negative image of the profession at the height of the epizootics problem. American veterinarians who implemented the inoculation and isolation policies were seen as "precursors of evil" by Filipinos (Buencamino, 1977, p. 107; Topacio, 1915; San Agustin, 1916). Who would want to become an oppressor of livestock owners during that time and be ridiculed with names such as "Dr. Damulag," "Dr. Kalabaw" or "Horse Doctor"? (Buencamino, 1977, p. 107, 109).

4. Buencamino: The Cattle Importer, 1920-1933

The government's policy to import bovine animal opened new business opportunities to Filipino cattle importers. Since the local stock of carabaos and cattle were susceptible to animal diseases, many people favored imported cattle. Cattle importers earned by selling imported carabao and cattle at exorbitant

prices, from PhP100 to as high as PhP150 apiece (Youngberg, 1922; Bureau of Agriculture, 1908).

Many Filipinos who entered into the cattle importation became frontrunners the industry. Buencamino did not miss the opportunity to earn more so he entered the cattle importation business and partnered with Don Ramon Soriano, a successful contractor and businessman. Soriano and Buencamino imported cattle from Australia, Hong Kong and French Indo-China for local consumption and for the production of biological products against animal diseases (Buencamino, 1977). When they started their cattle importation business sometime in 1916, they organized a limited partnership with an initial capital of only P30,000. Soriano was responsible for the importation of the cattle while Buencamino provided veterinary services and administered the cattle slaughtering business. During their initial operation, they imported an average of 50 heads of cattle weekly. Buencamino organized a small crew of butchers to slaughter the cattle during noontime and distributed the slaughtered beef cattle in the afternoon. The beef cattle were prepared for sale in the market stalls in the early morning of the following day. Buencamino noted that the business was very profitable because their beef were usually sold before noontime (Buencamino, 1977).

4. Buencamino: Director of the Bureau of Animal Industry, 1933-1935

The Philippine Legislature passed Act No. 3639 in 1929 and under this Act, the Bureau of Animal Industry was created as the sole agency tasked on all matters pertaining to animal disease control in the Philippines (Philippine Legislature, 1930). In 1930, Buencamino was appointed as assistant director of the newly created Bureau of Animal Industry. Three years after, Governor General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. appointed him as the first Filipino director of the Bureau of Animal Industry upon the recommendation of Senate President Manuel Quezon. Aside from serving as Director of the Bureau of Animal Industry, he also served concurrently as Acting Director of the Bureau of Commerce in 1934. In 1935, Dr.



Buencamino resigned as director of the Bureau of Animal Industry (Buencamino, 1977).

6. CONCLUSION

Many Filipino experts in various fields are not given enough recognition for their important achievements and contribution to society and the country. Unfortunately, Victor Buencamino was one of them. Dr. Buencamino was not only the first Filipino veterinarian and director of the Bureau of Animal Industry. As the only Filipino veterinarian in the American insular bureaucracy during the early twentieth century, he played an important role in the American-dominated Bureau of Agriculture that led the campaign against animal contagions in the Philippines. His expertise and valuable insights in the campaign provided American veterinary officials a Filipino perspective to a highly western approach to control epizootics. His observation and analysis to the American-led campaign served as the voice of the antagonistic Filipino farmers and livestock owners. His inputs and suggestions as the first Filipino veterinarian in the Bureau of Agriculture and the first Filipino director of the Bureau of Animal Industry contributed significantly to the American colonial government's battle against animal contagions.

Buencamino was also a pillar of veterinary medical education in the Philippines. As the first veterinarian in the Philippines, Buencamino was one of the pioneers of the UP College of Veterinary Science. He played an integral role in the development of its early veterinary medical curriculum. He was also the first Filipino veterinary professor in the College of Veterinary Science which was dominated by American educators. It is because of his important achievements that Dr. Buencamino should be given due recognition not only by Filipino veterinarians and medical professionals but by all Filipinos.

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