How American Soldiers Named the Bicol Region in 1900? - MabuhayRadio

Written by Bobby Reyes
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T he Bicol Region is the southern end of Luzon, the biggest island in the Philippine archipelago. The Spaniard colonizers under Miguel Lopez de Legazpi arrived in the region in 1569 - two years before the Spaniards were to set foot in what was to become the Philippine capital of Manila.

The Bicol Peninsula (at least the southern portion from Albay Province to Sorsogon Province) was called "Ibalon" during the pre-Hispanic era. Eventually the Spanish reached Naga, then (and which remains as) the regional cultural center. The Spaniards re-christened Naga the City of Nueva Caceres, after Caceres in the Extremadura Region of Spain. To date the archdiocese headquartered in Naga City is called the Archdiocese of Caceres. The province where Naga City (Nueva Caceres) is located is called Camarines Sur, as named by the Spaniards. The principal city in Albay Province was named Legazpi. So if the Spaniards did not name the region "Bicolandia," who did?

So who named the region and when was it named? I asked my fellow Bicolano members of the then Bicol eGroup to provide answers for my queries.

Glen Newhall e-mailed the following data: "According to Jose Calleja Reyes (Bicol Maharlika, 1992), Bicol got its name for the 'bico' river flowing through the region. He has some really interesting accounts about the Bicol Region in his book." (Editor's Note: Jose Calleja Reyes is not related to Bobby Reyes.)

Lilibeth Credo, another member of the Bicol eGroup, said, "That's what I've learned from my Bicol Culture class in the University of Nueva Caceres (UNC) High School. Bicol comes from the word 'bico/biko,' which was used to describe the river now known as the Bicol River. Bico-bico daa kaya an Bicol River. In Partido (town), bico is 'tico.'"

In 1962 when I was a senior at the Divine Word High School in Sorsogon, Sorsogon, I wrote an account of how the region got its name. I said that when the American occupation forces arrived in the region in January 1900 the soldiers found the place, with all its rain forests, as quite cool and invigorating. So the phrase, "Cool, man, be cool," came to become a familiar phrase among the American soldiers, as they went after the retreating forces of the First Filipino Republic. When the Americans were about to cross the biggest river of the region, their commander asked the inhabitants its name. The native people answered, "Bico man an apod sa salog" (Bico is the name that we give to the river). Imagine the surprise of the Americans who thought that they heard them answer, "Be cool, man." The invaders must have liked the place so much that they called the region as "The Be Cool Region," which the Filipinos spelled eventually as "The Bikol Region." My history teacher did not die laughing at my historical essay; in fact my report was given a grade of 95.

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Here's the historical account of the American invasion of the Bicol Region, as found in the "Readings on Bikol Culture," University of Nueva Caceres Press, 1972:

· **"January 20, 1900 - General William Kobbe's Expedition to Bicolandia.** Acting upon urgent order from Washington to open up hemp ports of Southern Luzon because of the shortage of hemp in America, General Otis dispatched an American expedition under General Kobbe to conquer Bicolandia. This expedition, conveyed by the navy, reached the port of Sorsogon on January 20, 1900. Immediately, the troops were landed under cover of the naval shelling and attacked the town, which was defended by Colonel Amando Airan."

· **" . . . Colonel Arejola,** with his scantily-armed three militia companies, was forced to evacuate Nueva Caceres and set off to Minalabac, Camarines Sur. The next day he joined Col. Elias Angeles at Agdangan, Baao, where on the 24th of February a pitched battle was fought against superior American forces. The Filipinos had to abandon the field and retreated to Iriga." # # #

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