

Sorsoganons and Other Filipinos in Alaska Hold Also *Simbang Gabi* and Other Philippine Traditions on Christmas Eve

By JOSEPH G. LARIOS

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C HICAGO (*jGLi*) – The children of Ronnie L. Rey do not really need to call United States First Lady Michelle Obama to track Santa Claus

thru the North American Aerospace Defense Command. They can actually visit Father Christmas in the North Pole as shown in the photo that Ronnie, my nephew, sent me.

We are talking, of course, about the town of North Pole

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Alaska

, which is 15 miles from

Fairbanks

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Alaska

, where Mr. Rey's family lives. We are not talking about the geographic North Pole, which is 1,122 nautical miles (2,078 km) from Point Barrow, Alaska (the northernmost point of land in the United States), where the average

temperature is -30 degrees Fahrenheit.

Mr. Rey, a Technical Sergeant at the Eielson Air Force Base in Fairbanks, said they went to the town of North Pole last Dec. 22 when the weather was “tolerable,” which was minus 2 degrees Fahrenheit or minus 19 degrees Centigrade or Celsius.

On Christmas Day, which was also his 34th birthday, Tech. Sgt. Rey just stayed at home with his family, including his wife, Contessa, 34, and their children, Angel Haven, 9, Ashley, 7,

and Aiden, seven months old, although he has invitation to have nochebuena (good night), a traditional family dinner, from other Filipino Americans in the city. He said the temperature was minus 16 degrees Fahrenheit, which is minus 19 degrees Centigrade or Celsius.

With population of 30,224 in 2010, Fairbanks has a racial makeup of 66.67% White, 13.10% Black or African American, 9.91% Native American, 2.72% Asian, 0.54% Pacific Islander, 2.45% from other races, and 6.57% from two or more races.

The biggest attraction of Fairbank's suburban town of North Pole is a gift shop named Santa Claus House, the modern-day incarnation of a trading post established in the town's early days. The Santa Claus House is known for the world's largest fiberglass statue of Santa Claus outside.

**FILIPINOS ALSO CELEBRATE *SIMBANG*
GABI IN ALA
SKA**

Prior to Christmas each year, the United States Postal Service post office in North Pole receives hundreds of thousands of letters to Santa Claus, and thousands more from people wanting the town's postmark on their Christmas greeting cards to their families. It advertises the ZIP code 99705 as the ZIP code of Santa Claus.

Despite its cold weather, Filipinos in Fairbanks still celebrate

Simbang Gabi

, a novena celebrated in the Philippines

nine days before Christmas.

In Ronnie Rey's case, he attends the mass in the chapel inside the Eielson Air Force Base, home of the 354th Fighter Wing, with some Filipinos but the mass is in English since there is no Filipino priest.

The tradition of *Simbang Gabi* dates to the 1600s in the Philippines. It traces its origins to Mexico, to a monastic monk by the name of Fray Diego de Soria. He is said to have received Vatican

permission to hold an outdoor Mass at dawn for Christmas, to accommodate all the people. It evolved into the novena tradition of holding an early morning Mass on each of the nine days before Christmas.

These Masses were called the “Misa de Gallo,” Spanish for “Mass at the rooster call.” Having Mass at such an early time in the morning helped people embrace the penitential spirit of Advent.

Because dawn comes so late in the day in Alas

ka

Filipinos and other Catholics in the state
celebrate

Simbang Gabi
in the evening.

Simbang Gabi is also a time for the faithful to pray for their special intentions. In Ronnie's case, because he will be transferring for six months from his Logistics, Readiness Squadron in Eielson Air Force Base to Qatar Al Udeid Air Base west of Doha starting on Jan 7, he had prayed for his safety and his family he will be leaving behind.

His family first relocated at the Eielson Air Force Base last July 2010. His tour of duty in that base will be up until June 2014, when he will be relocated elsewhere.

During their *nochebuena*, Ronnie's family treated themselves at home to spaghetti pasta and dinuguan (pork blood stew). “Meron din nag-iimbata sa amin sa isang handaan ng mga Filipino. Pero dahil sa lamig, dito na lang kami sa bahay namin nag-dinner.” (We got some invitation to attend a party with some Filipino friends but the cold weather prevented us from going out of our house. So, we just had our dinner in our house), Ronnie told this reporter and his relatives over the phone while his

relatives were also celebrating Christmas dinner and reunion in the house of his cousin, George L. Hernandez, in Chicago, Illinois.

B orn in Manila and raised in Sorsogon City in the Philippines , Ronnie is a son of the former Antonia Garra Lariosa and Rolando Rey, both of Sorsogon City

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The average winter low temperatures in Fairbanks range from $-15\text{ }^{\circ}\text{F}$ ($-26\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$) to -25

°F (−32 °C), but extremes can range from 50
°F (10 °C) to −60 °F (−51 °C) # # #

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