"Savages" in the White House and the 1904 World's Fair
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A few weeks back we had someone reach out to us who was doing research for an Asian-American Documentary Series for PBS. She asked what material we had related to Igorot chiefs making a visit to the White House. To be honest, this was the first I had heard of the visit, let alone the Igorot (Igorotte) people. The group’s name refers to a number of different Austronesian ethnic groups dwelling in the mountains of the Philippines. And indeed, they did make a trip to the White House in 1904.

The public’s fascination with the native Other had only increased after the Philippine American War and the ongoing Moro Rebellion, and the exhibits, as well as the press, played up their difference as if to justify the need for U.S. colonial intervention. During the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis in 1904, one of the most visited exhibitions by fairgoers featured native Filipinos, including the Igorots, Bagobos, Moros, and others, living in villages. Thousands of small exhibits also featured Filipino industry, military, arts, and missionary efforts among other topics.

Capturing the curiosity of fairgoers was a young teen boy named Antero Cabrera, who was taken in at 12 years old by anthropologist Albert Ernest Jenks as an interpreter for research he was doing. At the time the field was still new, and a lot of the research conducted by early practitioners is now considered junk science and aligned with problematic eugenics theories used to establish racial hierarchies by using tactics like measuring skulls or using skin tone to explain behavior.

Jenks was appointed director of Philippine ethnology for the 1904 fair, and chose Antero as a member of the Igorot delegation and Igorot Village on display. Exhibition promoters advertised the group as backwards, naked dog-eaters. In reality, the mountain dwelling group had long cultural ties to their land and retained their independence for over 300 years. They were successful in fending off the Spanish from taking their land (and gold), and later against Japanese occupation during World War II. Yet, to the average American, these people who dressed, ate, and spoke differently seemed like freak show attractions. As Nancy J. Parezo and Don D. Fowler write in Anthropology Goes to the Fair: The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, the people on display served as the "primitive before" to contrast the "civilized after" of the fair and its attendees (p. 13). In treating its participants this way, the exhibit distorted people’s image of the Philippines and erased the savagery being displayed by white military members in the name of civilizing these people who had not asked to be saved. After a public outcry over the indecency of Igorot’s G-string coverings, Roosevelt
wondered if they were "exploiting savagery to the detriment of civilization," as if seeing the mens' bodies could corrupt fairgoers. He ordered a brief halt to their traditional wear and required them to wear shorts until the uproar had passed.

In August of that same summer, Antero and a group of Igorot chiefs were invited to the White House to meet with Roosevelt. Antero served as interpreter for the group and performed a rendition of "My Country 'Tis of Thee." News of the visit ran in newspapers across the country, luring readers with headlines like "Savages in the White House," although this time dressed in silk coverings.

After the visit, Antero wrote a letter to Rev. Walter Clayton Clapp back home in the Philippines using a typewriter, a feat which again made headlines. Clapp and Antero would later create the first Bontoc-English dictionary.

Antero returned to the United States a number of times, both as part of performing troupes managed by unscrupulous showmen, as well as on exhibit at the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exhibition, and the Alaska–Yukon–Pacific Exposition in Seattle in 1909.
For more on the history of the exposition and the Igorot Village, and the complexity of exhibiting humans different from us, read *Anthropology Goes to the Fair: The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition* by Nancy J. Parezo and Don D. Fowler.

For more on the traveling shows of which Antero was a part, see *The Lost Tribe of Coney Island: Headhunters, Luna Park, and the Man Who Pulled Off the Spectacle of the Century* by Claire Prentice.

Click here to read the *Report of the Philippine Exposition Board to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition*. (If you do not see a scan of the book pages click on "See other formats.")