

Igorots in Belgium: Then and Now

By Cordi- Bel

(Read by Susan Kilakil)

We are standing today on a very remarkable place for us, Igorots. This Woodrow Wilson Plaza rings in us, Igorots of today, a certain pride and determination. A certain pride because in the years between 1911 and 1913 when there was a world trade fair, Gent, Belgium was one of the sites.

I would like to share with you what we found in the research of Patricia Afable regarding the Igorots in exposition in 1911-1913. In the spring of 1911 (like today), Schneidewind brought 55 Igorots from Bontoc to France. England, Belgium and the Netherlands were among the countries in Europe they traveled to. What is so intriguing to us, at the moment, was the account of their stay here in Gent. The situation may seem humiliating which is hard to take but in spite of it, there is also a certain pride because two members of the troupe were reported to have written a letter to the then President Woodrow Wilson of the United States, whom I believe this Plaza is named after. The letter was about a complaint of their situation as well as not having been paid. This is a pride for us today because in such a seemingly hopeless situation, one or two Igorots have stood up in defense of human dignity. I would like to read to you an excerpt of the research of Patricia Afable on the Igorots in exposition in 1911-1913.

"Schneidewind ran into financial trouble in Ghent (Belgium). Two members of his troupe, Ellis Tongay and James Amok wrote President Woodrow Wilson about the group's problems, including not getting paid and not being allowed to go home. An investigation ensued, and the U.S. Consul at Ghent was called upon to contact the group. Despite a rather sympathetic report from the Consul, and also despite the wish of half of the group to stay on with Schneidewind, the U.S. government officials decided they had had their fill of the "Igorrote problem." The Bontoc people were told to return home, and in December 1913, were taken to Marseille by rail to catch a boat for Manila. (This account contradicts Rydell's (1984:284), which is derived from a newspaper article. It said that "Igorrotes" were found wandering the streets of Ghent and that 8 or 9 of them died there). One intriguing mystery in this story is that one man remained behind in Ghent, and was last seen boarding a train to Brussels." (The Igorot Quarterly, October- December 2000, Vol. IX; No. 4; p. 28)

Today, we are here as Igorot migrants in Europe, gathered together with you to show that we are human beings worthy not only for exposition but also for a cause. We shall carry on the determination that our ancestors have demonstrated here in this Plaza. We know what we want and we are working hard to realize what we want for us, for our children and for our children's children. Thus we are standing with you to seek your solidarity, an active solidarity wherein we stand on the same ground and work together hand and hand for the realization of a true development and lasting peace.

Thank you!