

Crossing the sea is a natural occurrence in an archipelago like the Philippines. In the olden days, the distances between the country's many islands were bridged by various forms of water transportation for such purposes as trade, communication and travel.

From the crude fishing boats constructed by native dwellers to the naval vessels sent out by the colonial administration to coastal towns, these conveyances became the vital link that brought into contact disparate groups of people – introducing them to a new world, bringing them news from another place, making them think of reaching far-off destinations.

In the Visayan region, the growing sugar industry on the island of Negros at the beginning of the 20th century spawned the need for water crafts that could bring the goods to the market. But along with the produce, it also became evident that these vessels were necessary to transport the people who owned the farms and those who would work the land.

Many of the landed families actually came from Iloilo, part of the Panay island which also counts the provinces of Antique, Aklan and Capiz, in its fold. With their resources, they were able to purchase property in outlying Negros Occidental that they were to turn into sugarcane plantations. To inspect their haciendas and to bring in the seasonal workers known as the *sacadas*, they rode a sailboat known as the *batel* or a barge used to transport sugar called the *lorcha*. The trip was difficult and inconvenient, often lasting as long as twenty-four hours – more if the weather was uncooperative.

The Birth of Negros Navigation

The situation clearly called for a better mode of transportation. With the intense economic activity between Panay and Negros – propelled by the sugar trade and the constant movement of people – the introduction of a passenger ship seemed to be the ideal solution. So it was that a group of sugar planters



The *batel*, a locally crafted sailboat based on the original Portuguese model, was primarily intended to transport goods. It was a popular form of transportation in the Negros-Panay area at the beginning of the 20th century.

The *lorcha*, a flat-bottomed cargo boat that had to be pulled by a sailboat or tug, could carry 50 tons of sugar. The later model, patterned after the Brixham trawler of Devonshire, England, was a schooner-rigged boat capable of holding as much as 100 tons of sugar.



and businessmen from Iloilo and Negros Occidental, headed by the late Julio Ledesma and Don Vicente Lopez, created the Negros Navigation Company in 1932.

Even before the company was incorporated, the group was able to negotiate the purchase of a vessel called the *Marapara* from businessman Cesar Barrios which he offered for sale at P360,000. Ledesma and Lopez figured that they could put up P40,000 each and convince others to join them so that they could make an offer. Indeed, soon after, they were able to raise the needed sum. An announcement in Ilonggo was published on July 15, 1932 confirming the deal.



What's in a Name?

It is not known why the company was called Negros Navigation when its main office was in Iloilo and the majority of its stockholders were from Jaro. Carlos Ledesma, the company's third president, advanced the theory that since there was already a firm called Iloilo Shipping at the time that the company was founded, the incorporators might have adopted Negros Navigation to avoid confusion.

On July 26, Negros Navigation was registered as a corporation with the following as members of the incorporating board: Julio Ledesma, Vicente Lopez, Januarío Jison, Cesar Ledesma, Juan Ledesma, Manuel Hechanova, Antonio Lizares, Nicolas Lizares, Carlos Lopez, Placido Mapa and Aurelio Montinola. Julio Ledesma became its first chairman of the board and president; Vicente Lopez, vice chairman and vice president; Antonio Lizares, treasurer; Januarío Jison, secretary; and Manuel Hechanova, general manager.

Founding Directors



Julio Ledesma



Vicente Lopez



Cesar Ledesma



Juan Ledesma



Manuel Hechanova



Antonio Lizares



Nicolas Lizares



Placido Mapa



Carlos Lopez



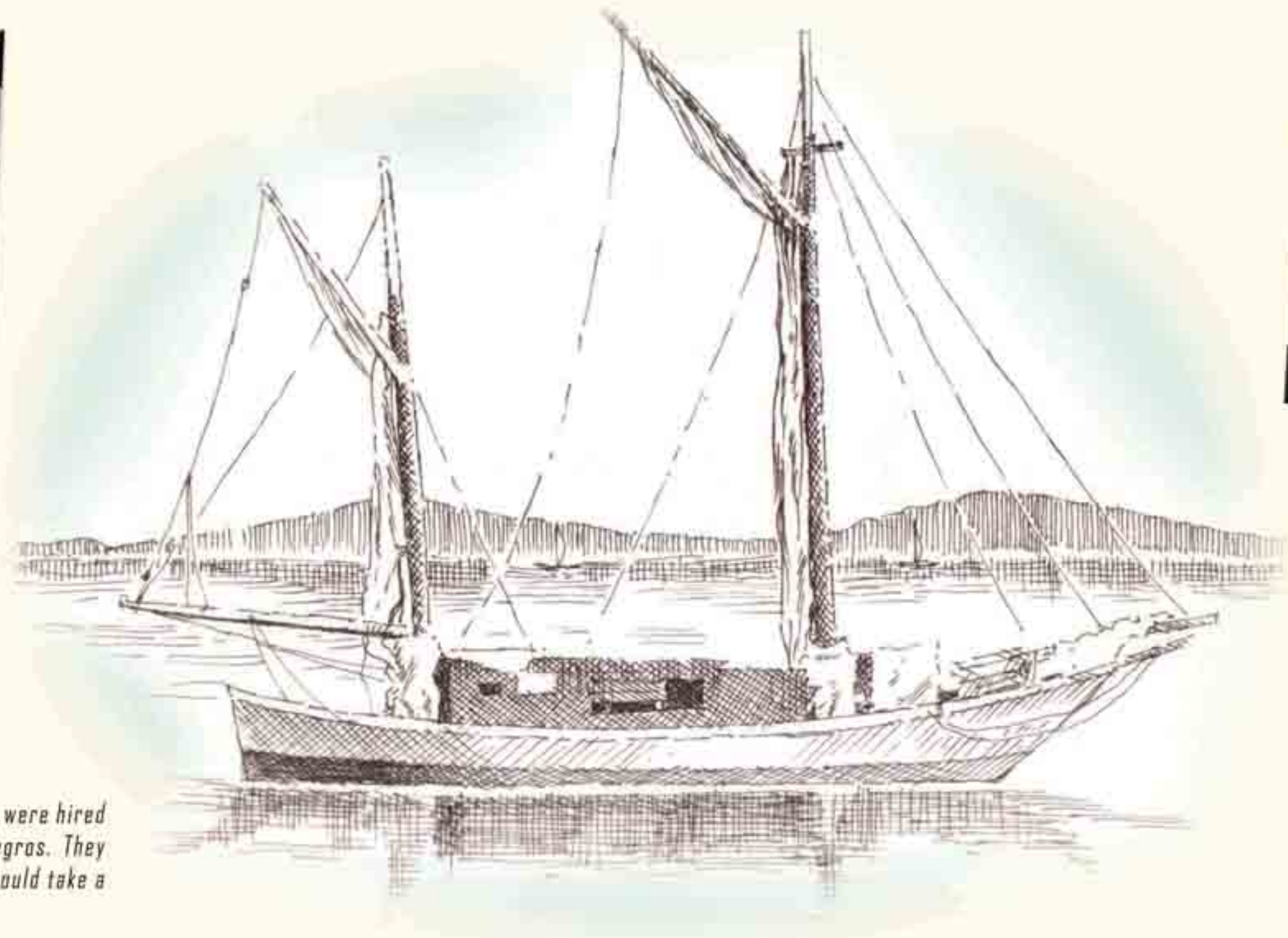
Aurelio Montinola



Januarío Jison



The migratory workers known as the sacadas were hired to work on the sugarcane plantations of Negros. They rode the batel to reach Negros, a trip that would take a day to a day and a half.



They would come in the month of September to harvest the canes. By May or June, they returned to their homes in the various towns of Panay, Romblon, Bantayan, Palawan and even Bicol.





Another vessel ordered from Hong Kong arrived in Iloilo in October 1932 and was christened the *Princess of Negros*. This ship inaugurated the first twice-daily trips between Iloilo and Silay. In 1933, a new *Marapara* was built to order from Hong Kong and was placed on the Iloilo-San Carlos-Dumaguete-Cebu run. A third vessel, the *San Carlos*, was bought second-hand in Hong Kong and was included in the Negros Navigation fleet in January 1934, servicing Escalante, Toboso, San Carlos, Guihulngan, Bais, Dumaguete and Cebu.

The *Princess of Negros* previously docked at the Silay wharf in Barrio Sum-ag, located some distance from Bacolod, which had long been the political and religious seat of Negros. Not having its own port had long been the city's drawback. The Sto. Niño dock was privately owned by the Bacolod-Murcia Milling Company and served only the barges that transshipped sugar from the trains to the larger vessels out at sea. These large cargo vessels were too big for the shallow Sto. Niño dock, thus they had to drop anchor as far as two kilometers away.



Negros Navigation became a faithful ferry service to many Negrenses and Ilonggos.

Opposite: The Princess of Negros inaugurated the first twice-daily trips between Iloilo and Silay in October 1932.

The Unknown Sailor

In August 1933, the *Princess of Negros* had just departed from the Silay wharf when a fourteen-year-old boy jumped overboard to retrieve the hat of a Chinese man. But the waves proved too strong and the boy shouted for help. A young man jumped to save the boy, but he too found the waves too much for him. The two shouted for help.

A member of the crew, a rope around his waist and a lifesaver on hand, jumped into the waters and saved the two. The boy held on to the hat that he had managed to recover. The crew member was hailed for his heroic deed. Negros Navigation got good publicity for its concern for its passengers. Unfortunately, the sailor's name was not revealed, but his story has become part of company lore.

A Wharf of Their Own

Anticipating the advantages of a wharf nearer to Bacolod, the company secured an off-shore lease from the government and prepared to build a wharf in Barrio Banago in the late 1930s.

The Banago project was undertaken under the leadership of Don Juanito Ledesma, who had taken the reins from his father as president. Actual work on the wharf started on February 1, 1940, using a construction process said to be similar to the method used in the reclamation of the new Rizal Park in Manila. A wall of boulders was first put up, with the gaps filled in with cement. Sand from sea was then dredged into the enclosure, then covered with earth and pebbles for a road bed. From this, a wharf of wooden planks, supported by wooden posts, was constructed seaward.

On January 5, 1941, the Banago Wharf was inaugurated with a lot of fanfare. Don



Since its inauguration in 1941, the privately owned Banago Wharf has served the ferry, fishing and inter-island ships, bringing to Bacolod huge economic benefits.

Juanito cut the ribbon officially opening the wharf after he crossed the plank from the *Princess of Negros* which had brought him, his officials and guests from Iloilo. Beneath the elaborately decorated arch right where the plank was to be laid waited the officials of Bacolod, officers of Negros Navigation in the city and hundreds of guests and onlookers.

Though a private wharf, Banago served the ferry, fishing and inter-island ships that brought to Bacolod huge economic benefits. Bigger tonnage vessels made it a regular port of call in their operations before World War II. Banago is recognized as the principal factor in the competitive advantage that has since characterized Negros Navigation's operations in Bacolod.

The Stones that Built Banago

A wall of boulders had to be constructed as foundation for the proposed Banago Wharf. Fortunately, along the railways of the Talisay-Silay milling districts, there were thousands of boulders cleared from the sugar field since the pioneer days of the sugar industry. The boulders varied in size, from the smallest, akin to a man's head, to a tonner.

Atty. Ignacio Salazar, assistant manager, proposed that these boulders be hauled via railway to the dock in Talisay. The process involved many hands; in the absence of modern equipment, it became an engineering feat. Two to three poles were used as fulcra to slowly roll the boulders from the cars, then along the pier and a plank to a barge rented from the Visayan Transportation Company. The stones were then brought to where the wharf was to be constructed.



The Pulupandan pier was an important hub for inter-island shipping in the Negros region.



The Muelle Loney, the century-old pier of Iloilo, alongside the Iloilo River, has been a busy area since the early part of the 20th century.

In the Nation's Service



World War II came to the Philippines in the morning of December 8, 1941. Within the first week, Iloilo was being bombed in-

termittently. In contrast, not one bomb was dropped on Negros. Many workers there, who had their families and roots in Panay, thus felt that Negros was a safer place to stay in. The sugar industry had apparently become its shield. Not surprisingly, the flow of people between the two provinces continued unabated. The *Princess of Negros* continued its daily voyage, carrying evacuees and their families and earthly possessions.

The ship also became instrumental in transporting trainees from the 72nd Division which fell under the military jurisdiction of

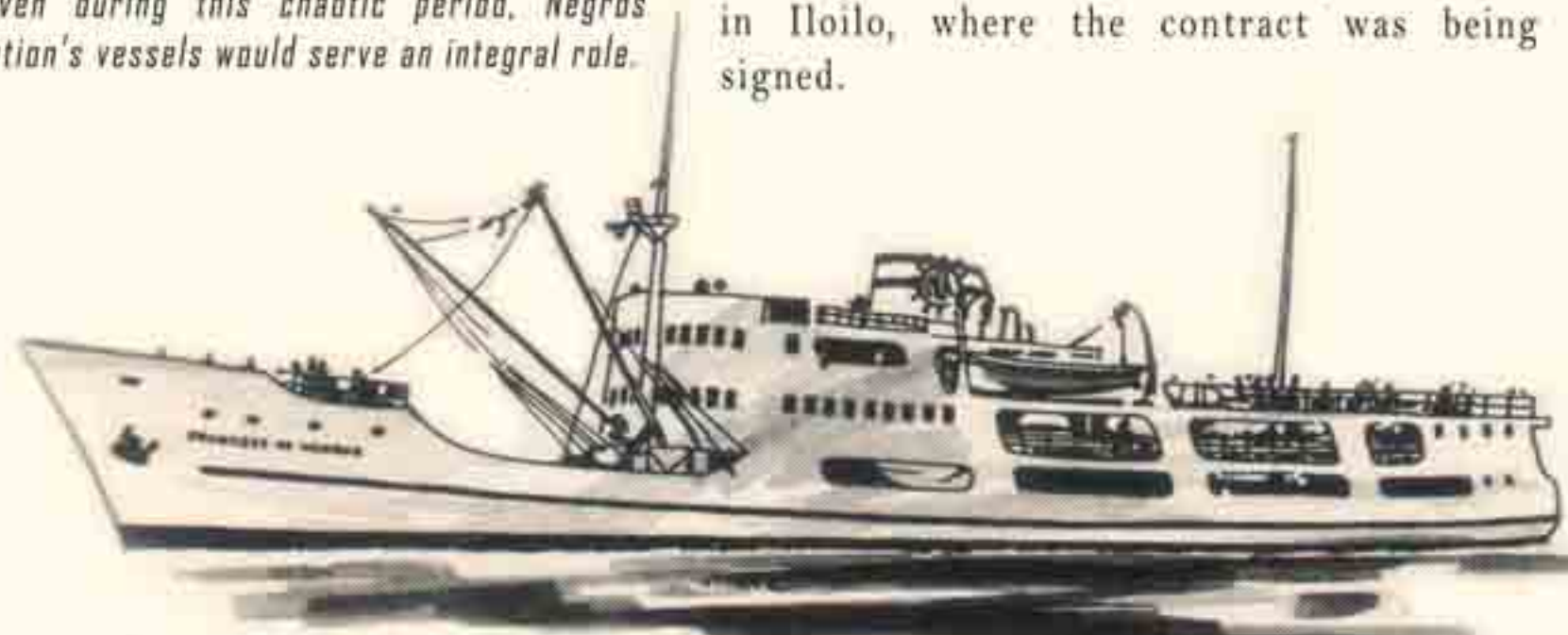


Iloilo. The country was then divided into seven military districts, Iloilo being the sixth and Negros the seventh. As communication between the various military districts became more difficult and commands were given greater autonomy, Negros was placed under the American command in Iloilo. Because of this, the continuous movement of troops between the two provinces kept Negros Navigation in route.



War threatened to disrupt shipping operations, but even during this chaotic period, Negros Navigation's vessels would serve an integral role.

Soon after, the United States Armed Forces in the Far East (USAFFE) decided to charter the *Princess of Negros*. The contract was signed on March 9, 1942 between the USAFFE, represented by Major Thomas N. Powell Jr. and Captain M.E. Clelland Jr., and Negros Navigation Company, represented by Atty. Ignacio M. Salazar. The bombs were falling as the signatories gathered at the house of Dr. Jose R. Roxas, director of the Iloilo Provincial Hospital, on Fajardo Street in Iloilo, where the contract was being signed.



After the original Princess of Negros was lost in the war, a renovated vessel was named in its honor.

After the raiding planes departed, Atty. Salazar brought the contract to the Bureau of Customs which had jurisdiction over all shipping lines for registration and safe-keeping of a copy in its archives. The customs clerk signed its registration and receipt. One copy of the contract was later on

furnished each to Antonio Lizares (who had been appointed Governor of Negros Occidental by President Manuel L. Quezon), Don Vicente Lopez and Don Juanito Ledesma. Salazar retained one copy.

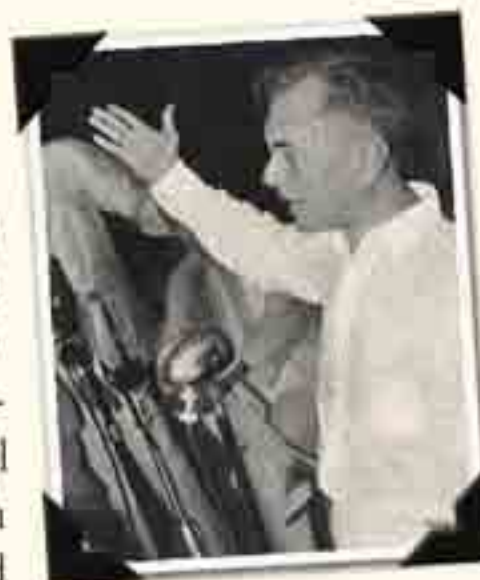
The agreement stipulated that the United States Army would pay Negros Navigation an amount per charter, but if the amount reached the book value of the



ship of P342,000, the company would turn over to the USAFFE full ownership of the vessel. On the other hand, if the ship was lost, the USAFFE would be obligated to pay the same amount. The contract also provided that should the *Princess of Negros* survive the war, the charter would be automatically terminated and the vessel returned to Negros Navigation.

VIP Passenger

For several days in February 1942, US President Franklin Roosevelt had been urging Philippine Commonwealth President Manuel L. Quezon to escape from Corregidor. The moral and political victory that the Japanese would have should Quezon fall into their hands would be a serious blow to the Allied cause. But Quezon refused to leave.



Unknown to even the ship's crew and most officials, President Manuel Quezon traveled to the Visayas on the *Princess of Negros* in 1942.



By the middle of February, however, Quezon recognized the hopelessness of the situation in the Philippines and the importance of his presence outside Japanese hands to continue the fight. On February 19, Quezon and his top aides met in Corregidor and by the end of the night, split into two groups that then took separate sea transportation bound for San Jose, Antique, their rendezvous point. From there, three days

later, the two groups again started off separately, with Quezon traveling by land. The next meeting point was to be Iloilo.

Both groups arrived in Iloilo at night. After securing fresh clothes and provisions from the Army depot, they immediately boarded the *Princess of Negros* for the vessel's first day trip to Bacolod. The presidential party tarried along the deck until the Banago wharf was cleared of passengers, then proceeded to Governor Lizares' residence in Talisay.

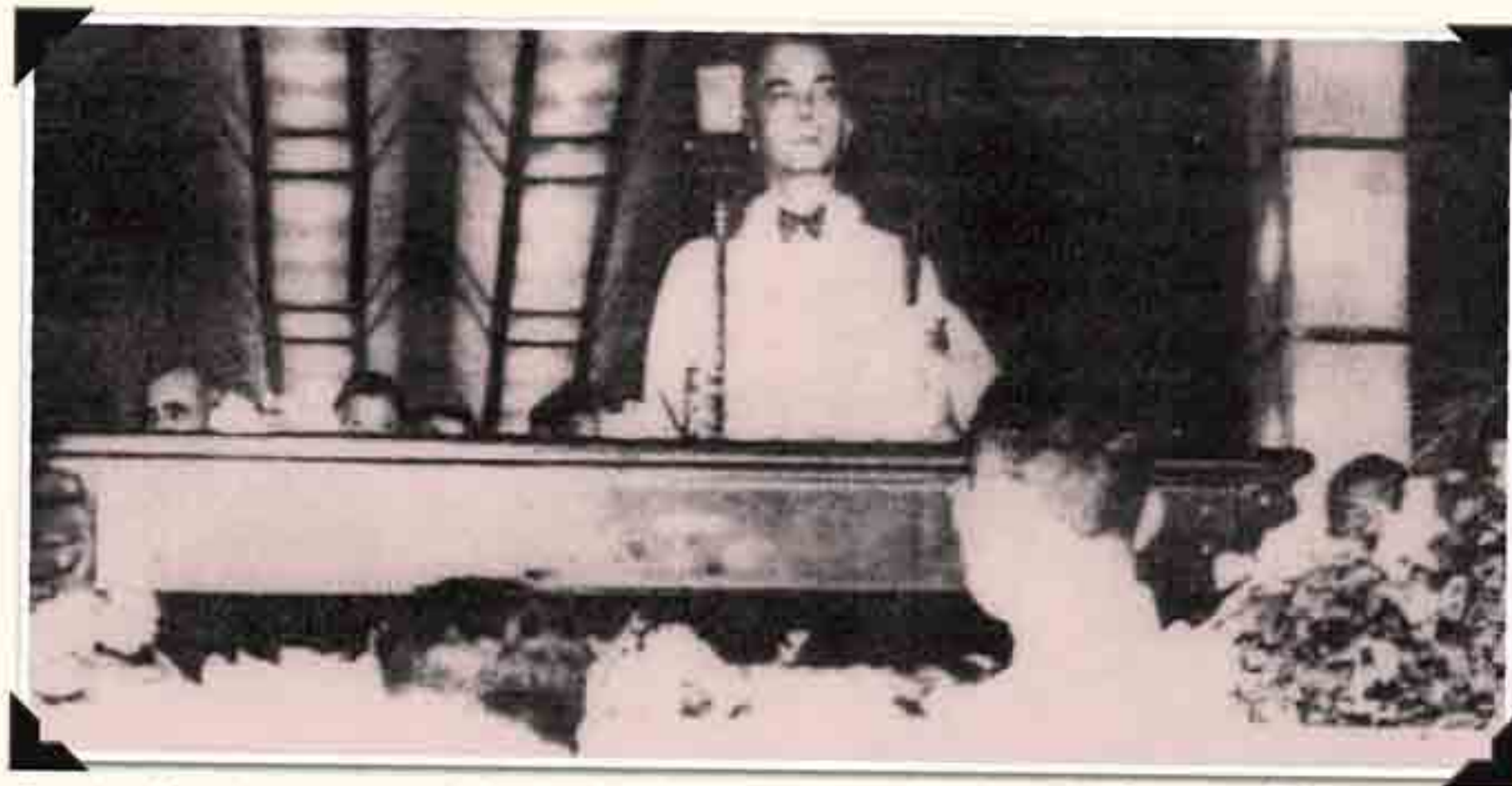
The trip was an extremely top secret operation. Except for a handful of top officials of the military and the governors of Antique and Iloilo, no one knew of the presence of the highest officials of the Commonwealth government. Not even the crew of the ship was told of their precious cargo nor were the officials of Negros Navigation aware of their presence. Thus, many of them later denied that Quezon had been on board the *Princess of Negros* bound for Bacolod.



When the ship was docked near Fort San Pedro, the USAFFE transferred to it all of Quezon's provisions, clothes, books, medicine and papers. But it was ordered wired for destruction in case the enemy captured it to prevent the identification of the contents of the ship. It was then ordered to meet the presidential party in San Carlos, Negros Occidental, for a trip to Cebu and other Visayan capitals before proceeding to Mindanao. Quezon had decided to visit the provinces not under Japanese control to explain his departure and to give instructions to the local officials personally on how they should act in case the Philippines fell under Japanese rule.

But such plans were ultimately aborted. On March 14, a day before the Presidential party was to be picked up, as the *Princess of Negros* was anchored off Refugio Island, it came under fire from Japanese gun boats that were patrolling the area. However, instead of being blown up should it come under enemy

attack as had been planned, the ship was abandoned by the USAFFE-appointed captain. Subsequently, it was towed to Manila by one of the Japanese destroyers. From its contents, the Japanese confirmed their suspicion that Quezon had escaped from Corregidor and was somewhere in the Visayas.



President Quezon's provisions, clothes, books and papers were brought on board the Princess of Negros.



In 1940, Gen. Douglas MacArthur voiced his fears to President Quezon that war in the Far East was imminent.

Quezon was ultimately fetched by a PT boat dispatched by General Douglas MacArthur and brought to safer grounds.

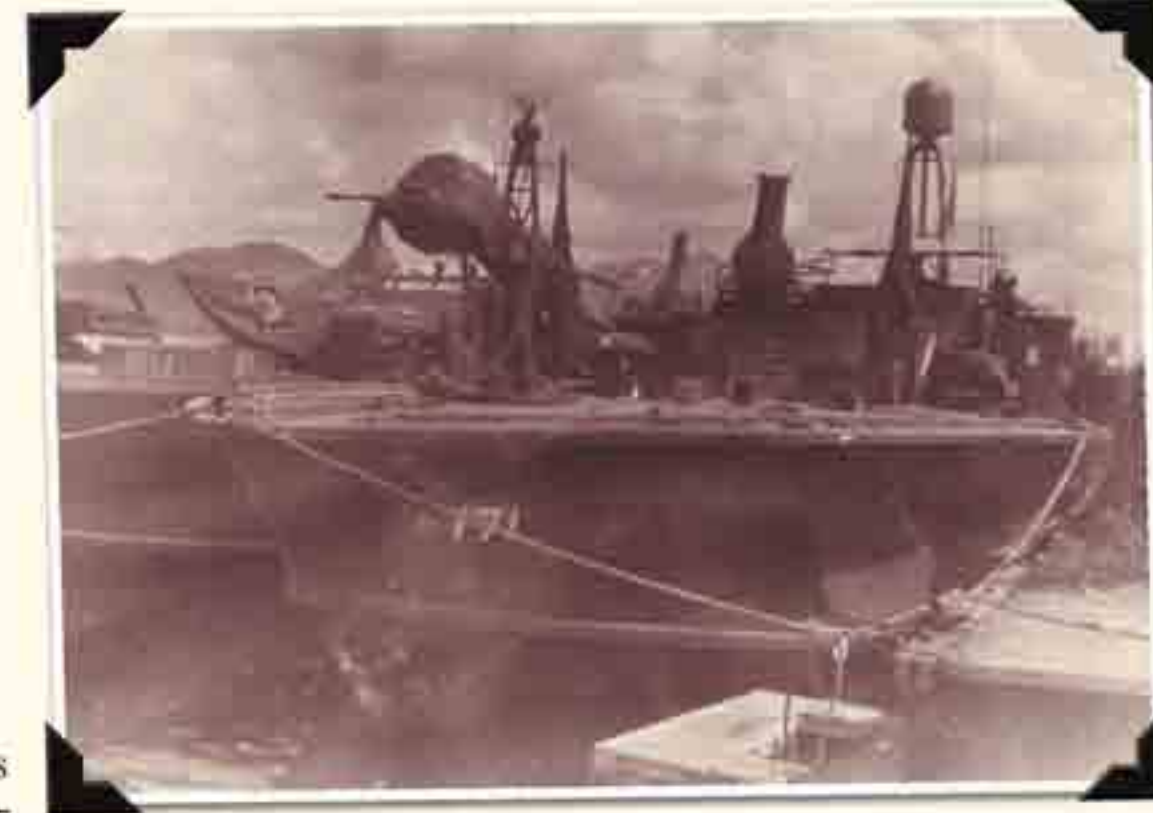
The *Princess of Negros* met a sad fate. It was absorbed into the Japanese service fleet, traversing the Manila-Corregidor line, and was eventually sunk by the Americans while it was docked at the Manila Bay in 1945.

Meanwhile, the Banago wharf was ordered destroyed by the Japanese. They poured gasoline on the wooden planks and set it on fire. Almost half of the 1,200-meter length went up in smoke.

Post-War Recovery

From the ashes of the war and the psychological impact of its aftermath on business, Negros Navigation rose to expand itself and become the mainstay of the social and economic growth and development of Western Visayas. The company responded well to the demands of this growth and provided the region with the means by which the region was to retrieve the excellence and predominance it had prior to the chaos of World War II.

The company tried to make a war damage claim for the loss of the original *Princess of Negros*, but because of the difficulties and length of time involved in the process, later settled for a compromise amount of P120,700. Many of the partners were also leaning toward the dissolution of Negros Navigation, but Don Juanito prevailed on them to reconsider.



In the post-war era, American PT boats were purchased and converted into passenger ships.

He proposed that a PT boat that he bought under the sister company, Ledesma Shipping Lines, be converted into a passenger craft at his own expense. If the venture proved successful, it would belong to Negros Navigation; otherwise, it would be his own risk.

Post-war operations hence resumed in early 1947 with the conversion of the PT boat into a passenger ship with a capacity of 150 passengers which would just be suitable for the still damaged Banago Wharf. The renovated vessel was christened *Princess of Negros*, in honor of the original one that was lost during the war.

Don Juanito's instinct that things would turn around was proven right. In less than a year of operation, the company netted a

P50,000 profit. He would use this amount to finance the post-war fleet of Negros Navigation.

Due to limited resources and the non-availability of shipyards to undertake new construction, the early post-war years of Negros Navigation were characterized by a policy of acquiring the most suitable second-hand equipment and restoring the full operational capability of Banago Wharf.

Thus, in August 1947, two PC-type steel-hulled vessels were acquired and fitted with passenger-cargo (PC) specifications. The PT boat was sold and the two vessels were named *Princess of Cebu* (later to become the third *Princess of Negros*) and *Princess of Panay*. The former was placed in twice-daily service between Iloilo and Banago and the latter in twice-daily service between Iloilo and the government-owned wharf in Pulupandan.

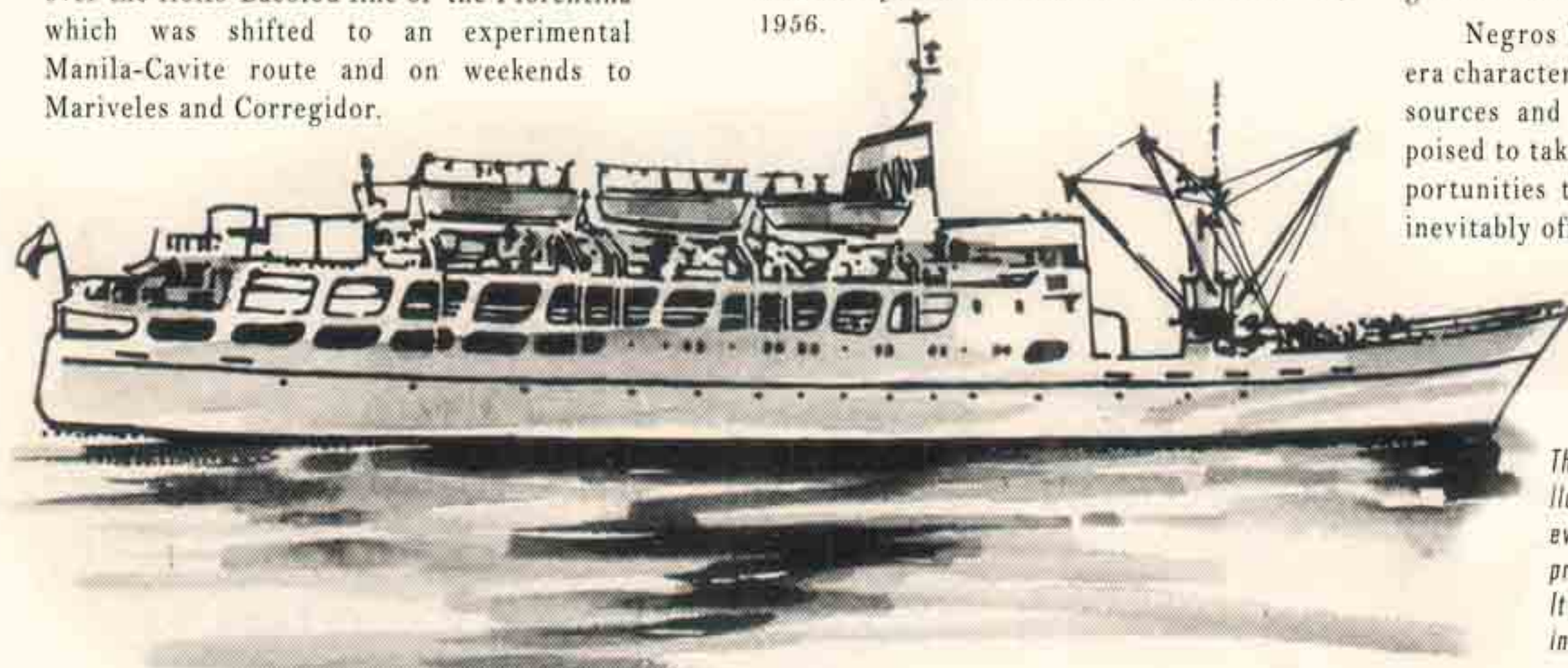
Looking Ahead

The 1950s was a decade of continued progress for Negros Navigation, marked by the acquisition and fielding of more ships to cover new routes.

The restoration of Banago Wharf to full-operational capability in May 1950 augured well for the company. It was exactly at that time that the company acquired a third PC-type vessel which was christened the *M/V Florentina* and which serviced the Iloilo-

Bacolod route. The new *Princess of Negros* meanwhile took over the Iloilo-Pulupandan line while the *Princess of Panay* was held in reserve to assure the commuting public regularity and reliability of service.

The *M/V Don Julio*, originally a vessel of the Ledesma Shipping Lines, was acquired by Negros Navigation in 1954. The ship took over the Iloilo-Bacolod line of the *Florentina* which was shifted to an experimental Manila-Cavite route and on weekends to Mariveles and Corregidor.



The Don Julio, which served the Iloilo-Bacolod route in 1954, was eventually tapped for the increasingly profitable Iloilo-Manila-Bacolod line. It was the company's first attempt at inter-island venture.

But it was later decided that the *Don Julio*, a luxurious airconditioned passenger-cargo liner, could service the Manila-Iloilo-Bacolod route. The ship thus became a preview of the high standards of service and accommodations that would typify Negros Navigation's entry into the competitive market of inter-island shipping. The *Don Julio* completed its first run on November 27, 1956.

To accommodate a growing traffic of passengers and cargo, the company decided to open a branch office in Bacolod in January 1957. That same year, Juanito Ledesma requested his younger brother Carlos to succeed him as president. Carlos thereafter began introducing his own brand of innovation with emphasis on corporate planning, growth and finance.

Negros Navigation thus entered its third era characterized by a consolidation of its resources and a stabilization of its finances, poised to take advantage of the additional opportunities that the country's growth would inevitably offer the shipping industry.

At the onset of the sixties, Negros Navigation surged ahead with plans to claim a bigger stake in the shipping industry. Aside from finally occupying its own building on Muelle Loney, alongside the Iloilo River, in 1960, it resumed its policy of acquiring only ships that were designed to specifications.

A ship ordered from Hong Kong was to be christened the *Princess of Negros* – the



The Doña Florentina ushered in the era of luxurious and efficient, high-speed passenger-cargo liners in the Philippines' inter-island trade.

fourth in line to bear the name – and was immediately placed on the Iloilo-Bacolod line.

After carefully assessing the potential for inter-island shipping, and in pursuit of its program of planned growth and development, the company next purchased an even bigger ship. Named the *Doña Florentina*, it began servicing the Manila-Bacolod-Iloilo route in September 1965.

With its airconditioned accommodations even in the economy class, the *Doña Florentina* ushered in the era of luxurious and efficient, high-speed passenger-cargo liners in the Philippines' inter-island trade. The ship's success encouraged the company to again place another order with the Japanese firm that had built it.

The gleaming white ship, which arrived in Manila in December 1967, was christened the *Don Julio* and it joined the *Florentina* in ferrying passengers between Manila, Iloilo and Bacolod. Being more passenger-oriented, the *Don Julio* was airconditioned in all classes, boasted more passenger space and more cabins and also offered dormitory-type accommodations.

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Negros Navigation finally occupied its own building on Muelle Loney, alongside the Iloilo River, in 1960.

Rapid Expansion

The sight of the *Don Julio* being launched and the rapid expansion of the company's fleet convinced Atty. Ignacio Salazar that a new general manager should take his place. It was a full-circle moment when Antonio G. Hechanova, the son of Manuel Hechanova, the company's first general manager, was chosen as Salazar's successor.



The social unrest in the 1960s again tested Negros Navigation's resilience.

The late 1960s proved turbulent as strikes, street demonstrations and pickets became daily occurrences in the cities. But despite the radicalization and agitation of the labor unions, the employees of Negros Navigation never went on strike. Hechanova acknowledged that those were grueling times. It probably helped that the company had good employee benefits, including a profit-sharing scheme and the chance to purchase shares on an installment basis.



NN's Cagayan de Oro staff in the 1970s



The Cagayan de Oro branch conducts a tree-planting project in 1973.



General Manager Antonio Hechanova hands over a trophy to the winner in a company-sponsored golf tournament in the 1970s.



Eleven-year-old Jules Ledesma, now congressman for Negros, gets a kiss on the cheek from First Lady Imelda Romualdez-Marcos who graced the launching of the Don Julio in 1967. Photos taken on the same occasion show other family members and guests.



The company believed in marketing its fleet of ships, placing advertisements in the newspapers and producing promotional materials such as postcards.

The expansion of Negros Navigation meanwhile continued. In 1969, the company acquired a new vessel which was christened the *Don Vicente*, after one of its founders. Together with the *Princess of Negros*, it made six trips between Bacolod and Iloilo. The entry of *Don Vicente* appealed to travelers between the two places because of the frequency of its trips, the comfort it provided and the low cost of its fares.

In 1971 came the *Don Juan* which combined the best features of the *Doña Florentina* and the *Don Julio*, offering more passenger accommodations than the former and more cargo space than the latter.

These three vessels became the model of inter-island shipping, as attested to by the numerous rewards and citations that Negros Navigation reaped for good food, cleanliness, safety, punctuality, maintenance and efficiency.



The Don Vicente appealed to travelers because of the frequency of its trips between Bacolod and Iloilo, the comfort it provided and the low cost of its fares.



A priest leads the blessing and inauguration of the Negros Navigation building in Makati.



The corporate and sales offices are housed in the new headquarters.

The 1970s

While the fleet steadily increased, steps were also taken to improve company facilities on land, particularly in Manila. Negros Navigation opened an office right at Pier 2 on a lot leased from the Bureau of Customs. It also undertook the construction of a modern passenger terminal and cargo warehouse complex - the first of its kind at the North Harbor. Meanwhile, in Bacolod, the capacity of the Banago Wharf was also increased with the completion of a concrete extension.

There was a heightened economic activity in the Western Visayas region at the start of the 1970s, what with the sugar prices soaring to new price levels. This translated to increased travel and consumption among consumers. Negros Navigation responded to this opportunity by offering charters on its ships, taking revelers to the Ati-Atihan Festival in Iloilo and later to other places. By January 1972, the company had made a firm commitment to the country's growing tourism industry, with Daniel Lacson Jr. placed in charge of marketing the project.



Passengers wait to board their ship at the terminal in Pier 2.

As part of its support of the tourism industry, Negros Navigation acquired a cruise ship which was christened the *Doña Monserrat*. This luxury vessel had mostly cabin accommodations, had a swimming pool and passenger lounge. It was a pioneering venture, offering charter service around the archipelago and outlying Asian countries such as Indonesia and Singapore while servicing the local tourist market between charters.

It was also during this period that the company also recognized the huge potential of the cargo market. Thus, in 1973, it launched its first cargo vessel, the *M/V Connie*.



A pioneering venture, the cruise ship that was the Doña Monserrat offered charter service around the archipelago and outlying Asian countries such as Indonesia and Singapore.



The painting of a typical scene at Banago Wharf hangs at the first-class passenger lounge there. Below is a detail from the artwork painted by Lar Sumagaysay in 1976.

Oil Crisis

A crisis erupted in 1973 when the oil-producing countries imposed an embargo on the export of their precious resource, causing prices to skyrocket. With all of its vessels dependent on fuel, Negros Navigation was caught in the squeeze and major decisions had to be made.

Ultimately, the *Doña Monserrat* had to be let go of. The concept of a luxury liner may have been ahead of its time. It was fully booked seven months of the year. With the increased cost in fuel, however, the ship's limited operations could not sustain itself in the long run.

The company maximized the use of its fleet to meet passenger and cargo demands while cost-reduction measures were simultaneously adopted. Fortunately, the passenger traffic between Negros and Iloilo went on unabated. The introduction of packaged cruises also contributed to growth even in that

demanding year, with the firm's vessels used as floating hotels.

The succeeding years were no less difficult. But Negros Navigation demonstrated resilience under pressure. With the appointment of Daniel "Bitay" Lacson Jr. as co-executive vice president and chief operating officer in 1979, the company underwent a restructuring aimed at making itself more responsive to the challenges it faced while also charting new directions to ensure its survival and growth.



Opposite: Doña Monserrat was intended to serve the growing tourism industry.

Above: A souvenir item inspired by the luxury liner that boasted of a swimming pool and mostly cabin accommodations.



N

egros Navigation's life story closely resembles sailing the seas, buffeted at one point by turbulence, then fast-propelled in calm at another. The rough sail points had been World War II, the OPEC crisis, the lackluster *Doña Monserrat* investment and the *Don Juan* incident. The years of glory were punctuated by episodes of struggle.

By 1987, with a new government installed, the national economy slowly picked up. An invigorated Negros Navigation set its eyes on a variety of business ventures, among them machine works, agri-industry and insurance brokerage. Making strategic investments in sectors of the economy deemed attractive was an attempt at diversification.

Thinking Global

In the nineties, the mantra was to think global. All the innovations put in place were in answer to the growing sophistication and demands of passengers.



The fifth version of the *M/S Princess of Negros* was proudly launched in 1992 with the *M/S San Paolo* soon after.

The growing sophistication and demands of passengers pradded Negros Navigation to go glabal in its services.



The fast ferries were introduced in 1995 to cut travel time between Bacolod and Iloilo by a full hour. NN invested in brand new catamarans from Singapore as part of its fleet modernization program and in an effort to link the short routes between the major islands it served. The bus shuttle service was also introduced to enhance passenger comfort even prior to or after sailing. It raised NN a notch higher in service.



State of the art catamarans, free passenger shuttles and sophisticated amenities were introduced in the 1990s, bringing NN service a notch higher.

