

## WHEN BAUXITE WAS KING – Part 4A

### A WELL-DESERVED TRIBUTE TO THE DEMERARA BAUXITE COMPANY

By Dmitri Allicock - for Guyanese Online



To ask any resident of Upper Demerara if they knew bauxite, would be like asking a coal miner in West Virginia if he or she knew coal. My father would jokingly say that they could mine his lungs and find quality bauxite there. He served 47 distinguished years with this company. As we reflex on bauxite, I can hear the deafening words ringing in my ears, *“you never miss the well until the well run dry”*.

The story of bauxite is the story of Upper Demerara. The decline of bauxite would lead to many families leaving their ancestral homes, as they never did before. Most will never return.



ARIVIDA ROAD-1960

The long association with bauxite came to an abrupt end soon after the government started nationalization of all foreign companies in 1971. Supply and demand economics also played an important role in the decline of the Bauxite Industry. Several hundred years of unbroken history in Upper Demerara were severed forever. New countries and uncharted courses are the lessons of the day. The failure of this industry echoes with far-reaching implications for most of the people of Upper Demerara and Guyana.

When bauxite was king, life changed, and was vastly improved for the people in the area. The workers at Mackenzie/Wismar were the best taken care of employees in the entire country. They were guaranteed jobs with decent pay, free and good health care for the entire family.

Demba provided low-cost housing, free schools by subsidizing education from primary to secondary, decent roads with good drainage and sanitation, reliable electricity and potable water as well as recreation in a clean, safe community.

Life was good. A man worked his eight-hour shift and was able to maintain his family in a decent manner. It was customary that he saved money to build a home *without a mortgage* and was able to move from the provided subsidized company houses.

Thousands of homes were constructed by Demba to house their employees. The entire area of Mackenzie including Kara-Kara, Industrial area, Rainbow City, Constabulary compound, Mackenzie High School teachers living quarters at Retrieve and at Red Wood Crescent were built by Demba. The exclusive areas of Watooka, Fairs Rust, Noitgedacht and the Richmond Hill area were also constructed to house their staff members.

As the company expanded, housing then moved across the river to Silvertown<sup>1</sup>, Wismar, Silver City, Christianburg, and the housing scheme areas on Wismar Hill. Along with housing came all supportive building of municipality services such as library, clinic, hospital, recreational hall, public pool, the Mackenzie sports club with tennis court and ground, all built for the comfort of their workers.

The Watooka guest house, pool, tennis court, school, dairy and golf course served the staff of Demba. Most of the illustrations are from the 1950s and early 1960s and most of these structures were already over thirty years old.

The Demerara Bauxite Company provided decent housing, fully equipped with electric, indoor plumbing and sanitation. My parents paid *85 cents per week* in all bills to live at the company-owned house at Mackenzie.

All homes and surrounding yards were sprayed once per month to keep down mosquitoes and pests. Garbage was picked up daily. Concrete drains flowed and were properly maintained.

Most of the community's children went to Christianburg, St Aidan's or Mackenzie primary schools before a secondary education was possible. The Mackenzie Primary School was closed in 1977 and students were transferred to the vacated Kara-Kara High School building. The Comacka School also provided a primary education for children in that area.

The Kara-Kara High, which started out as Preston High, later re-located to Blue Berry hill and became The Multilateral High.

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<sup>1</sup> Silvertown and Silver city were named after the silver colored Aluminum prefabricated homes that Demba provided.



**MACKENZIE HIGH SCHOOL**



**DEMBA TRADE SCHOOL AND WITH NEW TRAINEES**



The first recognized school in Mackenzie was started by Helen Orsford. The Mackenzie



Primary School was built in 1940. Echols High School from 1946 became Mackenzie High School in 1959. The Demba Trade School, now called The Linden Technical Institute, trained many in much needed skills before being hired. Most young workers served a nine month apprentice period before fully hired.

**MACKENZIE PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN AND TEACHERS CIRCA 1950S**



**THE FORMER TOWN SQUARE AT MACKENZIE CIRCA 1950S**

The now defunct **Crescent Cinema**, left of picture, provided much needed entertainment for the Community. Here is list of the movies at in April 1961 taken from Demba's Digest.

Sat 1<sup>st</sup>, Sun.2<sup>nd</sup> and Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> at 5.15 and 8.30pm

**"Home from the hill"** starring Robert Mitchum and Eleanor Parker plus added attraction Tues 4<sup>th</sup> at 5.00 and 830pm.

**"Young Jesse James"** Starring Ray Stricklyn, Willard Parker and Merry Anders

**"Until they sail"** starring Jean Simmons, Joan Fontaine, Paul Newman and Piper Laurie, Mon 3<sup>rd</sup> at 9.00am.

**"Treasure of the Golden Candor"** and **"Ride Vaquero"**.... Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> and Mon 10<sup>th</sup> at 5.00 and 830pm **"Last Train from Gun Hill"** starring Kirk Douglas and Anthony Quinn and also **"Career"** starring Dean Martin, Anthony Franciosa, Shirley Maclaine and Carolyn James.....The 1925 Recreation hall is next to the cinema, this building survives today.

There are no Cinemas in Upper Demerara in 2011 and only a few remain open in Guyana.

The decline of bauxite, and Guyana as a whole, has seen many Guyanese migrating all over the world to many countries, including the Caribbean Islands. Despite the free access to enter as visitors, that Caricom permits, the treatment of many Guyanese have been shocking. The Government of Guyana has protested and is involved in trying to prevent this ongoing trend of abuse and discrimination.

A large section of our neighbours in Silvertown were from the many island of the Caribbean like Barbados, Grenada, St Lucia, Antigua, Nevis, St Kitts and others. Some of my High School teachers were from Jamaica, Barbados, Nevis, and Trinidad to name some. They were welcomed and fully integrated in the community.



**Library on Arvida Road 1954**



**Mackenzie Primary School 1959**



**Mackenzie Hospital 1925**



**A newborn baby at Mackenzie Hospital in 1959**

The **MacKenzie Hospital** built and funded by Demba, practiced very decent health care. Every employee received free care and their family members had to pay half of a nominal fee. My parents paid a total of \$9.00 for my birth and the entire 5 days of hospitalization of my mother. For those who were not part of the company, care was given for a small sum. Those were the days when you spend up to 9 days in the hospital after having a baby or until the baby's umbilical cord fell off.

No one was rushed out of the hospital. Doctors and nurses both gave of their best and the hospital was ranked as one of the leading hospitals in Guyana and the Caribbean. The excellent and quality patient care practiced by the hospital cemented a very high degree of trust and respect from the entire community.



**Dr. Charles Roza**



**The Roza's family**

**Guyanese-born Doctor Charles Roza** was a legend of the Mackenzie Hospital. He was the first Guyanese staff member at Demba. In 1924, he worked at the first Mackenzie Hospital that was located where the Power house was built.

When the much larger Mackenzie Hospital of 1925 was opened he continued his great work there.

Many called him Uncle Charlie since he was almost a family member to all the people of Upper Demerara for so many years. He was loved; respected and held in the highest regard by all. Doctor Roza, as the chief medical officer of this hospital, was probably the single most representative individual contributing to the health of employees in the Bauxite Industry. His exemplary service included difficult surgeries, serving as a Medical practitioner, and obstetrician at times. He delivered Guyana's High Commissioner to India. He ran the Mackenzie hospital for decades.

The well dressed Dr. Roza in his white shark skin suite, tunic neck and white leather polished shoes holding his stethoscope, briskly approaching you was a welcoming sight to so many. His comforting words and touch was a full guarantee that you would be receiving the best of care. This remarkable man would work into his eighties at the Mackenzie Hospital and retired to England soon after the Nationalization of DEMBA.

There were other well remembered doctors that served like Dr. Caruthers and Dr. Cambon who once treated my grandfather James, when he very ill. After he recovered and returned home to Old England, Dr. Cambon and his wife would take his speed boat on occasion and travel up the Demerara to my Grandfather to take medicines and enjoy the outdoors.

One **world famous Dr. Gigioli** would rise to fame from **this hospital**. Born in 1897, Italian born Dr. Gigioli was the medical officer for Demba in 1922. He pushed for and accomplished the building of the 60 bed at the 1925 Hospital and fully equipped it with X-ray, laboratory facilities, sterile operation theater and a trained staff.

His fame was in the fight against **Malaria** in Guyana but his first calling was in the treatment of hookworms. 80% of the population was affected by this disease. He

provided the workers with boots and proper sewage disposal and the infection dropped significantly.

Malaria was also rampant and Dr. Gigioli was called into action. 50-75% of people treated at the Mackenzie Hospital were suffering from this disease.

The mosquito that carried this disease bred profusely following the rainy season in the large number of ponds found in the mining areas. At that time the only way to control of the disease was through a prolonged course of quinine, an unpopular and bitter tasting drug. The Country's first permanent Research Scientist, Dr Gigioli discovered that mosquitoes could not breed successfully in acidic water. This finding would lay the foundation for his work in fighting this disease.

He was able to identify the *anopheles darlingi mosquito* as the main carrier in Guyana. He obtained the newest weapon DDT which the allies successfully used in the Second World War. Results saw the overall health situation improve dramatically in the 50's and 60's throughout Guyana. The World Health Organization and the Pan American Health organization sought his assistance for anti-Malaria fight conducted throughout the Caribbean, South America, and later Africa and the Middle East. Doctor Gigioli died in 1975.

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**THE WOTOOKA GUEST HOUSE**