

## The Forties in British Guiana – Our Age of Innocence

Nostalgia 430 – by **Godfrey Chin**....godchin1@aol.com....

*Dedicated to my 'Geritol Posse' incl Dr Vibert Cambridge – Pluto Martindale, Cecil Glasgow, and Peter Halder – and of course 'the Overseas GuyAspora'. Please feel free to share – Ya think it easy!*

The Decade of the Forties – like milk – can truly be called ‘half and half. During the first half, the World on the Road to Ruin – the second half was on the Road to Recovery.

In my Homeland British Guyana, the Forties was ‘Our Age of Innocence’. Many reading this, ‘were not even born yet’ – They were a germ in their father’s sperm – a glint in their mother’s eyes – justifying this Nostalgia.

1940 while WW11 engulfed Europe, The Correira’s Family opened the magnificent Astor Cinema at Church & Waterloo St with ‘Golden Boy’ starring William Holden and Barbara Stanwyck.

The Mudland had begun to suffer the effects of ‘blocked sea lanes with several shortages of fuel, foodstuff, spares and our first ‘genuine ‘buy local – eat what you grow was expected. Grow More Food Campaigns as well as regular Blackouts were instituted Our mainstay was ‘ ground provisions – cassava – cassava bread, eddoes & yam – callaloo and ochro – with fish and poultry. St Vincent de Paul distributed ‘free loaves of bread’ at St Mary’s R C school on Brickdam, whenever shipments of flour were available.

The Local Government instituted some censorship of mail, cables, and telegraph – while prices were controlled to limit profiteering on scarce commodities. Even bar salt soap for washing was scarce and I remember my mother giving every visitor to our home ‘a wafer slice’ as a goodwill gesture. Her heart was bigger than her eye. ‘Greedy man usually vex twice’ was her favourite quote.

The Lend Lease Program March 1941 permitted the US Seabees to commence construction of the Air Base 25 miles up the Demerara River which was named Atkinson Field after Major Atkinson, who headed the construction team. By 1943, a long cigar like Zeppelin crossed the city twice daily to patrol for U-boats off the Coasts. The Bases in Jamaica, Trinidad and B.G. acquired under the Lend Lease Program were intended to be the USA outer defense,

Dr. Vibert Cambridge advised that ‘Drums of Fu Manchu – the native’s favourite action serial opened at the Astor Jan 1941. ‘Drums’ was released in Hollywood 1939 – which indicates that shipping lanes were open to BG for the first two years of the war. This is corroborated in that ‘Gone With the

Wind' which opened in Atlanta Dec 1939 was released at the Metropole Feb 1941. (Thanks Vibert for this nylon ) I conclude therefore that the sea lanes to the Caribbean were not blocked until after the Lend lease program commenced March 41 and USA declared War vs Japan after Pearl Harbour - and also Germany. 400 Ships were sunk in the Caribbean as Bauxite from Surinam and BG, as well as Oil from the Aruba Refinery were invaluable to the War effort at that time there were less than 20 miles of paved road in rural Guyana. Most were 2 strips of concrete inlaid in the center of a one lane red burnt earth – dusty strips in the dry season – muddy quagmires when the rain fell.. Of course there were less than 500 motor cars and approaching traffic would share the outer concrete strip. Recording car numbers were a favourite past time of schoolchildren. Bicycle and dog licenses were compulsory.

Travel abroad would be by Panam Clipper Seaplane which landed off Stabroek Market / Rowing Club or by the Lady Boats Nelson and Rodney, and Caribbean Schooners. The Coastland was served by the T&HD Railway – Georgetown to Rosignol, – Vreed-en-Hoop to Parika. S. S.Queriman was the Demerara River mouth Ferry, while Sproston's R.H. Carr carried passengers to McKenzie. Beef was first air freighted from the Rupununi Sept 9th 1945.

The 23rd Feb 1945, 3:25pm was a major Black Friday when fire broke out at Bookers Drug Store, crossed over to the Assembly Rooms and continued to destroy 37 business – 18 buildings including Fogarty's, RACS, the Post Office, Ferreira & Gomes, The Museum, Demerara Meat Coy – Geddes Grant. Only the concrete structures of Hand in Hand Insurance, G & TM, Royal Bank of Canada, Barclay's Bank, prevented the entire G'town Shopping & Commerce Center, downtown from being destroyed.

Two days later I climbed the southern staircase of Chronicle House which was less than 12 feet from the destroyed Bookers Drug Store and was miraculously saved by a strong north eastern trade wind.. After surveying the smothering embers, I walked to Water St where the glass cases of the Demerara Meat Coy were strewn on the road outside the destroyed Ferreira & Gomes. At seven I was already an accomplished 'cook-shop-fly'. Ya think it easy!

Later that year, the Nation celebrated the end of WWII, while the school children gathered at the Astor Cinema for a Thank-You of Patriotic Songs for VJ Day. Germany capitulated Aug 8th and Japan surrendered Aug 14th.

Friday May 9th 1947 was yet another Black Friday, when fire broke out at Hinck's St – on the site of the original Central Garage – destroying the Savoy Hotel, Regent & High St and the entire block of business. During the Decade smaller Booker Drug Outlets at Camp & Regent Sts and Cummings and Middle were destroyed by fire. The site at Camp St became Kwang Hing's Super Market.

It was our Age of Innocence. We slept with our doors open – no bicycle locks were necessary and the only larceny was ‘raiding the neighbour’s fruit trees, and ‘fowl coop thieves’. The Jail on Camp St had enough accommodation for all ‘recalcitrants’ – while wayward youngsters were dispatched to Onderneeming, Suddie..

The Jagan’s – Cheddie with his wife Janet returned Dec 1944 and by the end of the decade had aroused the native’s interest in self governance and local politics. Janet formed the Women’s Political and Economic Organisation – and co-founded the Political Affairs Committee – thereby arousing the Working Class to seek ‘better wages and working conditions. Cheddi Jagan was elected to the Legislature in the 1947 Election, and by 1950 formed the People’s Progressive Party. The Trade Union Council was registered earlier in 1941.

The local census in 1946 was 375,819. There was a wholesale diffusion of condoms - ‘Yankee Bladder’ during the war. My father worked at the Base and I entertained the kids in the yard while the older folks were drinking upstairs, Xmas day 1944 – by stealing a large box under his bed – and distributing to the kids. Can you imagine the ol mas when they looked through the window and saw two dozen children playing ‘star war’ and ‘cowboy’ with long white sabres. I was dressed appropriately as Wild Bill Hickcock and received a ‘Max Schmeling cut-ass. Ya think it easy.

Our Governors for the decade were George Douglas Owen, Sir Gordon James Lethem, and Sir Charles Campbell Wooley. Our Mayors were Hon Claude Vibart Wight (3 times) – Hon Joseph Gonsalves – Hon Edward Marcel Gonsalves and Percy Claude Wight. Refer Hammie Green’s anthology ‘Georgetown.

I remember Mr. & Mrs. Jagan with son Joey – ‘surveying’ Claude Viera’s School on Robb St – which later became Freedom House.

Forbes Burnham was a Guyana Scholar 1942 – just eclipsing Stella Jackson who went on to be an excellent Latin teacher at Central High, known belovedly by her students as the ‘Latin Terror’.

1948 the striking Sugar Estate workers at Enmore Estate clashed with the Police – resulting in 5 workers being killed, to become the Enmore Martyrs. During that year the Volunteer Force was established and became out local militia until Independence 1966, when they were replaced by the Guyana Defence Forces.

While the Forties was our Age of Innocence – it was also the Age of Challenges as parents sacrificed relentlessly to ensure their offsprings received better education than they did, and qualified for jobs in the Civil Service and Commerce. Mothers stayed at home as Domestic Engineers – cooking, cleaning and

ensuring their chicks were happy and contented. There were no electrical appliances to help in the burden of household chores. Cooking was by coal pot and the need to dab 'chula' – ironing by flat iron – pointa broom to sweep – and hell to play when rain fall and 'napkins on the 'clothesline'. Woodward's Gripe water was a 'blessing.

Savings were kept in 'puzzlin boxes – box hands soo-soo – friendly Burial Societies – Post Office Savings Account and the two Banks – Royal & Barclay.

In Sports, Annual Inter-colonial Cricket between BG, Trinidad and Barbados dominated the decade with exchange visits, and exciting matches were witnessed at Bourda during the dry season of Feb/March and Sept/Oct. Local Cricket stars included R. J. Christiani, Berkeley Gaskin, John Trim, Peter Bayley, George Comacho – Neville Thomas – Bruiser Thomas – Norman Wight – Baijnauth - Jezzar Hill – Ganesh Persaud – Joe Elvis -Bruce Pairedeau and Harry Christiani; Overs were eight balls – the schoolboys stand was built on the North eastern end of Bourda – while the ground section was fenced to prevent intrusion onto the field. Jamaica with Frank Worrell and J K Holt visited BG for the first time Oct 1947. Christiani made his highest score 181 against their attack led by Esmond Kentish.

MCC under Gubby Allen visited 1947/48, – Christiani, Trim and McWatt toured India in 1948. and by 1950 the W.I. established themselves as a cavalier 'cricket force' defeating England at home. Ramadhin and Valentine – were 'those friends of mine'!

The football mecca was GFC with Ted Nurse – Selassie Small – Mannie Da Silva – Jim Parks – Bruiser Thomas – the Van Genderen Brothers – Stanley Moore – O T Donald – E D Small our local wizards. Laddie Lewis and Tarrant Glasgow held off any visiting opposition in cycle Sports at Olympiads at GCC and BGCC. Aquatic Sports were held at the GFC Pool and Colgrain House – with rowing at the Demerara Rowing Club, south of Stabroek Market

The Demerara Turf Club held at least two Horse Racing Meetings annually at Durban Park – with Dancing Master, Joan's Choice, Rockfel, Havoc – Potoro – China Clipper – Demosielle en Greis being top thoroughbreds. Lloyd Luckhoo was the announcer, Henry Gomes the Starter – while Sunich & Beckles were top jockeys.

Dancing was popular at the Clubs with Tom Charles Syncopators, Al Seales Washboards, Sonny Thomas – Cecil Nelson Lucky Strike – having popular fan bases. Venues such as Haley's, Rest Hall; Above the Laundry, Frolic Hall, N. P.C. the Friendly Burial Societies and Lodge Halls were popular venues. 'Waist lines' were measured and patrons paid by the 'sinch' Man.....if this happened today – Promoters would all become Rockfellers with 'the present refrigerator waists.

The Georgetown Cinemas included London, (Camp St), Empire, Metropole, Astor, Olympic, (Lombard St) Rialto (Vlissengen Rd), and Capitol (Albouystown), Top movies in the Decade were Great Expectations, Hamlet, Casablanca, Best Years of our Lives. Bells of St Mary's.- Song to Remember – Song of Bernadette. De Mille's lavish technicolour spectacles Reap the Wild Wind – Unconquered – Story of Dr Wassel – Royal Canadian Mounted Police as well as John Ford's / John Wayne's western epics – She wore a Yellow Ribbon – Rio Grande and Fort Apache. Sands of Iwo Jima and Mighty Joe Young were popular pit favourites at the Empire.

Olympic Cinema added a roof and after refurbishing 1947/48? was popular with 'Kidnapped – Good News – Scott of the Antarctic, and Abbott & Costello in African Screams. Hollywood. Cinema in Kitty was built by the end of the decade. They opened with Dicken's Christmas Carol.

Radio Broadcasts were from the ZFY Studios at North & New Garden St with popular programs including BBC News at 7:15am – 12:15 and 7:15pm. The Station closed at 9:00 pm with John Phillips Sousa's Washington Post March. Vivian Lee's quiz program Time is Money was a hit as was the Ovaltine Show and later Mrs. Snodgrass comedy.

Popular hit tunes included Rum & Coca Cola – Tennessee Waltz, Dance Ballerina Dance – Five minutes more. Time after Time – You'll never know – If – Tree in the Meadow – You are my Sunshine – Paper Doll – This is the Army Mr Jones – Cruising down the river – Golden Earrings – Ol Lamp Lighter – Caledonia – To each his own – Lovely bunch of coconuts -Open the door Richard – It's Magic – Manana – Slow Boat to China – Dear Hearts and Gentle People – Gypsy. Local Shanto Hits were Donkey City – Fan me Soldier Boy Fan me – and Fifteen Cents, Radio was our foremost entertainment media other than Cinema – which went 'dodo' – after TV reached 1985.

Bill Rogers – Sam Chase – Jack Mello – Madam O'lindy – Mighty Joe Young and Sam Dopie were our Vaudeville Stars. Len Houston – Dewan Singh – Young Joe Louis – Kid Tanner fought for boxing purses every Boxing Day at Olympic Cinema. The Muttoo Bros Band was the top Vaudeville band in these days and influenced our music – shanto to calypso especially in Trinidad. Refer Black Praxis Writings on Guyanese Music – a must read Anthology of Guyanese Music written by Dr Vibert Cambridge – Ohio University.

The Christmas hit was Bing Corsbie's White Christmas from Holiday Inn 1942 even though ironically the only snow locally we knew was 'snow cone'. 1949 Gene Autry's Rudolph the Rednose Reindeer was a hit also – as well as Mel Torme's Christmas Song sung by Nat King Cole. Western hits included Deep in the Heart of Texas – Don't Fence me in – and Pistol Packing Mama

The current Carifesta Ave was Kelly Dam – a narrow pathway track to the Golf club – and well kept playing fields including CYO, Teacher’s – Scout’s Ground – the back of St Stanislaus ground – Cable & Wireless – Rifle Ranges and Northern Rangers. The Demerara Golf Club became National Park after 1963 when their lease expired – while the Rifle Ranges and environs became The GDF’s Camp Ayanganna. The site of Pegasus Hotel (El Meridien) was a huge ‘Government Pond’ adjacent to King’s Ground.

The Militia Band gave public performances weekly in the Bandstands of the Botanic & Promenade Gardens, and the Sea Wall. For most of the decade, the foreshore off the Bandstand was ‘pristine beach’ – with the wreck of the KeyHolt an attraction, visible off Fort Groyne

By 1950 the RACS and Museum were rebuilt as was Bookers Universal. Our top Departmental Stores were Bookers – Fogarty’s – Bettencourt ( Eclipse & Unique ) – D M Fernandes – Kawall – Sanbach Parker, Kirpalani’s – Majeed – Khouri – A H & L Kissoon and Hutchinson. Also joining the fray at the end of the decade was Bata, Saraka and Searchlight were out stores for ‘juta’ – Yatching Shoe and strap-over slippers the standard wear. Serge Suits was a must for church and funerals – while pleated skirts and covered buttons and belts, were the fashion, from Bellas Hess and La Belle Magazines.

Yong -Hing’s – Kwang Hing’s – Resaul Maraj – Alexander and Albert Chin were the popular Groceries with Bookers – Ramcharran – Burrowes – Cendrecourt – Lachmansingh’s – Carfit’s – Bostwick – Green’s the dependable Drug Stores. Patent medicines included Carter’s Little Liver Pills – Mendaco for Asthma, Bronchitis & Hay Fever – Phyllosan for ‘looks & vitality – Moore’s Emerall for all skin infections – Ferrol Compound for cough – De Witts Pills for joint pains. Amridathra House on Regent St. pioneered lots of local medicine while Bookers Limacol was the ‘freshness of a Breeze in a bottle’. Nara – Ring worm – Goady – Big Foot were common afflictions.

Of course there was Soft grease for blind boils – and local bush remedies ‘sure cures’ in addition to each school term ‘clean out’ with cascara – epsom salts senna and castor oil. Popular Bush medicine included Ant’s Bush for Trush – Eucalyptus – Fitz weed – cunga pump – Leaf of life – Surinam Cherry – Quashie bitters – Aloes – Sweet broom – lemon grass – Must write soon a nostalgia on ‘Bush Medicine.

There was no ‘ready made ‘clothing’ – so cloth was bought by the yard and tailors and seamstresses sewed our clothing. The men’s 1Br suit costed \$20. After the war Imported Neck & Back chicken was cheap and popular as was Corn beef – nut butter and KOO Grapes in cans from South Africa – later banned with Apartheid.

Classic Comics – DC’s Superman – Spy Smasher – Batman – Capt America – Fawcett’s Capt Marvel were popular – while the kids scrounged the Library for Hardy Boys – Nancy Drews – Biggles – William & Billy Bunter. The Bedtime Stories series started our reading career.

Popular Liquor was rum from DIH – Russian Bear, Houston’s and Demerara White at Light & Fifth. I remember a case of rum -12 bottles for \$12. Empties fetched 4 cents for pocket money and half-price at the Cinema pit. Brown Betty rebuilt was our Mel’s Diner with Ferraz – Coppin’s – Gunie’s Chuck-A-Sang – Mount Eagle’s – and Castanheiro popular Cake Shops /Parlours. Deliveries were mostly by dray cart and carrier bikes – while W & R introduced the 3 wheel motorised Carts to deliver ice. Sue-A-Quan’s & Correira’s wine and pac-pac were also popular. Brown Betty introduced Popsicle – Fudgicle and Creamsicle in three wheel bicycle carts by 1946.

I remember a whole snapper – ice fish – 24 inches for 24 cents – 5 crab or hassar for 2 bits and 8 Buxton spice mangoes for a bit. A penny was a ‘mouthful mauby and bun treat. Toddy, Icing glass and Coague were popular.

Popular local Beverages were DIH Club drinks – Vimto & Pepsi – W&R Coca-Cola – Rahaman’s Red Spot – Juicee flavours from Hardina & Durban’s St – Verdun’s Lemonade – DeRyck’s and Mount Eagle Mauby. Shave Ice – compress were from hand carts – as was cow manure and ‘pots and pans tinkering/soldering – knives sharpened from passing street Vendors. Oscar the blind Newspaper Vendor, Walker the British – Cato – Bertie Vaughn – Law & Order were popular street characters.

At Christmas the popular street entertainment was the Santapee Bands, which behaved themselves to become Masquerade Bands with their Mother Sally and Mad Bull, fife and drums kicking dust. Steel Bands which originated from Trinidad on VJ day did not become popular on the city streets with Tramps, until Queen Elizabeth’s Coronation June 1953.

Local Newspapers were Chronicle, Graphic & Argosy with the Chronicle Christmas Annual a popular favourite. QC on Brickdam clashed annually with St Stanislaus and Berbice High in the Cricket & Football – (Jacob and Dias Cup) while their annual Athletic Sports produced many future National Sports Stars. The other Secondary High Schools – Central – Enterprise – Tutorial – Chatham also provided education to Cambridge Junior – Senior & Higher Senior level and attracted many rural kids to travel daily to Georgetown to improve their education.

Do you know that Q.C. occupied the site of Bishop’s High School before that institution was erected at Carmichael & Murray St? Bishop’s founded 1870, became a Government Institution and was built at

Carmichael St after QC moved to Brickdam in 1950. Field Hockey was introduced at QC in 1949, Saint Stanislaus at the other end of Brickdam celebrated its 80th in 1946.

Top local Hotels were Tower while Trent House (Punch Bowl) Park Hotel also provided accommodation for visitors. The popular HO House was Mom's at Wellington & South Road – while Londonderry House, another favourite became Cambridge University later. Taxi Service was provided by Bookers, Tower, and Norman's. The Motor Transport Bus Service was introduced by the end of the Decade.

Following the destruction of the Assembly Room – The Georgetown Club was re-established at Camp Street to become the new meeting place of the 'aristocracy'. There was a dearth of suitable venues for 'plays and theatre' after the Assembly Rooms were destroyed, and the Schools – Philharmonic Hall were inadequate for theatrical and Dramatic Productions. The Theatre Guild filled the void in 1957 and the Culture Centre followed in 1972.

Pipe water was introduced by 1950 and stave vats in yards and the large galvanised tanks in Albouystown – by St George's and the Promenade Gardens were dismantled. You previously fetched pails of water for 2 cents a bucket. Merriman's Mall was a canal flowing to the Water Works at Camp St – and with the canals on South Road – High St – Lamaha St – East St – Punt Trench well maintained and at least 6 feet deep – I can't remember any flooding in the City except for Camp St Avenue. Wordsworth McAndrew who went to Christ Church School delighted in splashing barefoot in the flooded Avenue – while admiring the 'girls at St Roses. There was a minor flooding around 1949 when the Koker off the later Banks DIH compound broke.

Those were the Days when Guyana was an Eldorado. It was our Age of Innocence when neighbours regardless of colour, race, creed, or religion were all Macmays – looked out for each other – sharing the little they had – and cared – scolded any child as if they were their own. Around 1958 when I read of a 'bombing' in Port-of-Spain Trinidad I felt 'totally safe in my homeland – boasting that will never happen 'locally'. I ate my words 4 years later 'when all Hell broke loose Friday Feb 16, 1962.

Ya think it was easy! GODc.

For more Nostalgias -refer to *NOSTALGIA de Book – Golden Memories of Guyana 1940 to 1980* or go to Godfrey Chin at Google or Yahoo. NOSTALGIAS de Book is on sale in Georgetown at various book stores or you can also order online at: <http://www.godfreychin.com/book.php>

**- Godfrey Chin**