THE 1933 DENHAM SUSPENSION BRIDGE OF GUYANA’S HINTERLAND

Gateway to the Mineral and Forestry rich Potaro

By Dmitri Allicock

Set like gems in the crown of South America, nestled on the North-Eastern shoulder, defying the raging Atlantic Ocean, Guyana's many waterways reflect the source of its name "The Land of Many Waters". These waterways are natural highways which link all the regions of Guyana including the mineral and forestry rich highlands.

In November 1933 a bridge was constructed over the Garraway Stream, linking Mahdia to Bartica by trail. This cable suspension bridge was named “Denham Bridge” after the then Colonial Governor Sir Edward Denham. The Denham Suspension Bridge, which is also called the Garraway Stream Bridge, served as a vital access to the early Gold and Diamond fields of Guyana.

The bridge was erected directly over the Potaro River at an area referred to as Garraway Stream. It was constructed by Scotsman John Aldi, a civil engineer and general contractor who was interred at Bartica’s Sorrow Hill Cemetery where he joined many of the early settlers in making Guyana their permanent home.

The association of the highlands of Guyana with gold attracted the attention of many early explorers. It was even suggested that Guyana was the source of the elusive and legendary city of El Dorado, fabled for its great wealth of gold and precious jewels.
In 1595, prompted by the great riches brought back from South America by the Spanish, Sir Walter Raleigh, Captain of her Majesty's Guard, Lord Warden of the Stannaries, and her Highness' Lieutenant-general of the County of Cornwall embarked from London on an expedition in search of the fabled city of El Dorado. Raleigh's expedition penetrated hundreds of miles up the Orinoco River into Guiana’s Highlands of present-day Venezuela, where he found some mineral specimens that contained gold. Upon his return, Raleigh published “The Discoveries of the Large Rich and Beautiful Empire of Guiana” with a relation of the Great and Golden City of Manoa which the Spaniards call El Dorado.

The discovery of Gold in the late 1850s brought many from all over Guyana and lead to the formation of the British Guiana Mining Company, whose fortunes were sought in the rich Gold and Diamond fields of Guyana’s Highlands.

Many hopeful miners travelled up the Essequibo from Guyana’s coast to Bartica, which was founded by an Anglican missionary settlement in 1842 and established as a town by an ordinance in 1887. Bartica called the “Gateway of the interior” and named after the red earth common in the area, is a prime location where three great rivers, the Mazaruni, Cuyuni and Essequibo converge. The vast flood of the united waters of the three is borne on the bosom of the Essequibo, past her hundred isles, into the great basin of the Atlantic.

It was necessary to establish some central depot from whence the gold industry could be regulated. A place where laborers could be registered, boats inspected and licensed, magistrates could adjudicate upon the gold disputes and Government officers’ could issue prospecting and other licenses. A place where a hospital for the sick could be established and a lockup for the disorderly, where the dead could be buried and the living entertained.
Bartica was founded and was able to meet all the requirements. Prospectors would stop at Bartica before continuing their journey up the unpredictable Essequibo and Potaro River, signaling the birth of the independent prospector, the “Pork knocker.”

Earnings were never sufficient and hundreds of men in the villages found great difficulty in finding employment in the estates and in the towns. Gold mining became a lure for these men and they singly or in groups departed for the interior districts in search of gold. Most of these miners operated independently or in small partnerships as soon as they staked mining claims in the interior areas where they “panned” for gold in the rivers. Since much of their diet consisted of salted pork, they were labeled "pork-knockers".

These independent, leathery and quiet men left the comforts of their homes for the inhospitable interior of Guyana armed with only a spade, battel and hope. They would spawn a tradition and way of life which is admired and still practiced today.
Many Pork Knockers would not return home until they had something substantial to validate for their long absence from wife and children. Homes were left for long periods without any support and mothers had to provide single handedly for the family as extended periods of 6 months or even a year would see homes fatherless.

The ability of the Pork knocker to withstand adversities of the tropical jungle life mixed with his reputation for big spending, rum drinking and womanizing became legend. These men and their stories have generated a corpus of tales and even a mythology. They have found their way into folklore and because of their existence “in the bush” their lore is associated with other folk material and traditions that have come out of the traditions and superstitious beliefs of that environment.

The pork knockers inspired the imagination of generations to write inspirational poems and books. These include the novel Black Midas by Jan Carew, an account of the legend of the famous pork knocker Ocean Shark. Educational Broadcast Corp. produced a remarkable presentation *Up River through Guyana* in 1993 which highlighted the search for the esteemed Pork knocker of Guyana.

The shout of gold and diamond brought many others from the Caribbean Islands including Trinidad, St Lucia, Barbados, and Jamaica to Upper Essequibo. The gold town called Mahdia was established in 1884, by Africans after their emancipation. Most of them travelled from the county of Berbice and the East Coast of Demerara in search of gold.

The British Consolidated Mining Company expanded the mining exploration in Mahdia and established Colonial Administrative offices. During this period Mahdia was only accessible by waterways.
THE ROCKSTONE TERMINUS OF THE 1897 DEMERARA/ ESSEQUIBO RAILWAY

The resiliency of the small town of Mahdia to withstand the rigors of fortune seekers and the boom/bust mentality that comes with gold and diamond frontier town sees it still providing a comfortable rest stop and launching point for both the Gold, diamond Industry and Forestry today.

The 1897 Demerara to Essequibo Railway between Wismar and Rockstone served the purpose of safe and reliable transport and access through Guyana’s primeval forest to upper Essequibo-Potaro gold fields. The calm and navigable Demerara River had the width and depth to allow ocean-going vessels up to Wismar and it provided access from Georgetown to this railway with transportation continuing from Rockstone via launches to Tumatumari and Potaro landing.

Access up the mighty Essequibo River was a different matter. Navigation was very dangerous due to the many rapids and waterfalls. Many people drowned as they tried to navigate the torrent Essequibo and boats capsized more often than not.

All the three great rivers, which centre at Bartica, are sown with rapids, whose rocks, like the dragon of the Hesperides are ready to tear into pieces the rash intruder who attempts the golden fruit. In these dangerous passes many a life has fallen victim to the lust for gold.
The Denham Suspension Bridge is still used by many including those who dare to venture into the heart of what is truly the essence of Guyana and to experience its tumbling rivers and dense rainforests filled with extraordinary natural sights. The Potaro River alone is home to nine waterfalls including the Kaieteur Falls, where the 400-foot wide Potaro River plunges 741 feet downward from the Pakaraima Plateau and is one of the world's great waterfalls. The Bridge is a part of the National Trust and Heritage of Guyana and like many others, are worthy of celebration and preservation.