PEG LEG GEORGE OF SEBACABRA

By Dmitri Allicock

A boat ride of time-travel which offers just a glimpse into the lives of our ancestors is not unlike a text or message from the past and, for a brief moment, their immortal spirit lives once more. A special opportunity revealed in the realization that our fragile existence might be made just a little more secure by our appreciation of them.

The history of early life in Guyana is enacted by the natural highways and significance of its waterways, the other regions in which the populated coastal plain settled and explored were those lands of the forest interior which lie along the rivers whose banks strung sparse villages of settlement. Along these rivers, including that of the Demerara, have carried the native people, adventurers, traders, and planters who carved their estates out of jungle and created history.
Writings and notations of explorers, naturalist and time travelers have captured and frozen prisms of time with vivid brush strokes of intrigue and fascination. Such an encounter of circumstances and fate is preserved by Henry Kirke\(^1\) in his 1898 book “Twenty Five Years in British Guiana” of his travels up the Demerara River in the year circa 1870.

Henry Kirke chronicled his journeys, preserving valuable information of that moment in time and history of the many individuals whom he encountered including that of George Augustus Allicock \{1833- Nov. 13 1880\}, who was born in that great transitional period in the colonies of British Guiana.

Two of the most significant events of history were occurring then, the separate three former Dutch colonies of Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice were finally united into one entity called British Guiana in 1831, governed from Georgetown, the former Dutch city of Stabroek, and the 1833 abolition act of Slavery which eventually brought an end of the Trans- Atlantic Slave Trade a few years later.

Henry Kirke wrote, “The old post of Sebacabra is an interesting place. A granite hill rises abruptly from the river, blocking its course, and forcing it to make a sharp curve to the left. The hill is nearly denuded of trees, which have been cut down to allow grass to grow for cattle. Here and there clumps of bamboos break the skyline or stand out against the hill.

On the shelving granite rocks at the river’s brink the house is built, surrounded by fruit trees. When I first visited the river, Seba belong to a woodcutter name Allicock, who lived there with his wife, pretty little daughter and sister-in-law. Mrs. Allicock was a white lady of Scottish descent and a very handsome, dignified body she was.

There was a deep pool in the river in front of the house, and this we use to draw with a seine on a moonlight nights, landing at times a great number of strange and blue-hued fishes. One night, as we were hauling, paddling slowly in two boats, the seine felt very heavy, and we thought that we had made a fine haul of fish, when suddenly from the centre of the net arose a huge monster, black as ink against the moonlight, with great dark jaws extended into the air.

With loud exclamation of terror, the Indians dropped the lines and with a sudden splash, the monster fell back into the deep. “Good Heavens, Allicock! What is that? I exclaimed. “I don’t know,” he said, “never saw anything like that before” The Indians were talking in a low voice amongst themselves, and I caught the word “water-mamma” which is a legendary monster supposed to inhabit certain reaches of the river, and to drag unfortunate wayfarers under the waves.

However, water-mamma or not, we must have it out if we can, so the men resumed the ropes and began hauling again, and once more the formidable monster reared up its bulk as before, and fell back with a resounding splash. Allicock burst out laughing. “I know what it is sir; It is an old sunk woodskin!”

\(^1\) Henry Kirke was a former Sheriff of Demerara.
A woodskin is an Indian canoe, made from the bark of the bullet tree, and kept open by two pieces of wood stretched across and fastened by Illianes. Being somewhat pointed at both ends, as it was hauled up it seems like the head of a huge alligator against the bright moonlight.

A dance was a great institution amongst the river folk. As many of them came from long distances, it was not thought worthwhile to spend only a few hours in dancing. One occasion when I was present, at Seba, the company met at six p.m., began dancing soon afterwards, kept it up till four a.m, and, after a long rest in the daytime, began again with renewed energy at sunset, and danced on to another dawn. The band consisted of an old cello, a fiddle, a triangle and a tom-tom.”

Seba or Sebacabra is located south of Botaba in the Demerara and once was the home to an Arawak tribe in the 1800s that was decimated by a flu epidemic. The survivors moved to other locations higher up in the river. An isolated tribe of Macushi lived just above Seba around that time period.

Seba became a large quarry and provided most of the stones in 1940 for constructing Atkinson Air Field the now Cheddi Jagan International Airport at Timehri. Atkinson Field was built 28 miles (45 km) from Georgetown on 68 acres (28 ha) of land formerly known as Hyde Park, on the Demerara River. The forest was cleared and hills were leveled and a long concrete runway was constructed. On June 20, 1941 the airfield officially opened with the activation of a weather station. The station was named after Lieutenant Colonel Bert M. Atkinson, a United States Army Air Service World War I aviator.

It must have been shortly after the visit of Henry Kirke that George Allicock had a logging accident resulting in the loss of one leg. Logging is still ranked as one of the most dangerous occupations in the world where the loss of limb and life are most threatened. He was called Peg Leg George by his contemporaries in his short eventful life.

Peg Leg George Allicock was married to a Forsythe of Scottish descent and had two children Eleanor Agnes, and George. Eleanor Agnes Allicock was married to Robert Stuart Lorimer in July 19, 1876, and had children Marie, Ivy and Ruby. George, the son, was married to a woman of Chinese origin. His history and family connections were lost when he left the area. George’s Lorimer’s grandchildren continued to weave the web of family and links in Upper Demerara and descendants are known today.

Peg Leg George Allicock’s large groups of siblings have many descendants around Guyana and around the world. Both of the brothers, David {1840-1910} and John {1842 1912} are my paternal and maternal great -grandfathers. His brother Garvan Allicock{1834} is the ancestor of the famous Westmaas family of Guyana which includes professor Rory Westmaas, Dr. Nigel Westmaas and writer Sharon Westmaas. Many more descendants of significance are traced to this family of Peg Leg George. He died at the youthful age of 47 in 1880 and not very long after his meeting with Henry Kirke, of unknown cause.

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2 The bark of the Purple Heart is prime material for making woodskin. The woodskin is used and then sunk when not in use by the travelers who prefer this method of concealment and security.
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