

Rainbow City High Newsletter



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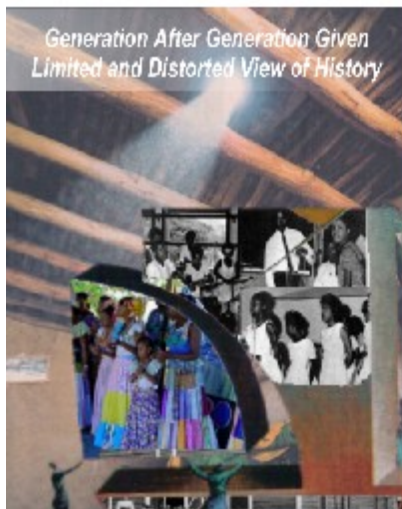
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Examining our past, ourselves, and our future

Slavery, what it did--and what it is doing!

Brought from Africa by force and violence, the uprooted slaves were subjected to severe deculturation!



Generation After Generation Given
Limited and Distorted View of History



Slavery to the Americas all begun in the Caribbean Islands. Historians believe that the Portuguese first brought the Negro slaves to the Caribbean Islands in the 15th century. The Spaniards and Portuguese were accustomed to holding black slaves, because of the tradition that blacks were descendants of the biblical Ham and bore his curse, and the belief that they were better able to support the hardships of the plantation labor.

The British emancipation in 1838 freed over 1/2 million slaves in the Caribbean Islands. The freed slaves were ruthlessly exploited and lived in conditions not far removed from slavery. The use of black children as laborers along with rents was common practice on the main crop. The death

The freedmen sympathy or access to develop little consequence brain. By doing not

**Slavery/Mis-Education:
The Seat of our Problems**

**Exploitation and
Racism a Common
Thread in our History**

**Is the Damage
Irreversible? We say no!**

**Let there be light! But let's assure that it
never goes dark again!**

Again, and at the risk of repeating ourselves on occasions, the following is another twist in our analysis theory of the facts regarding our history. The purpose is to promote the need for community solidarity in order to combat apathy and mindless conformity. The exploiters of the race are not so much at fault today as the race itself. We will free ourselves of exploitation just as soon as we decide to do so by coming together and acting as a community.

As elders of the community it's our duty to bridge the gap to future generations. This task is/should be above any one person or organization and should be carried out by an appropriate designated community body. We cannot be part of any "melting pot" in Panama without our own defined identity to pass on to future generations. We, therefore, appeal to the

appropriate "intellects" of the community to brainstorm and arrive at an "official" view of our history. Our failure to forge a common version of the events in our history is dooming the young to repeat the past as we did. History is never set in stone. It's written and rewritten in each generation. The events of the present always help to reframe the events of the past, and the events of the past should always help us to reframe the age we are living in.

We first need, however, to arrive at a common civic and history curriculum with the hope of building a consensus and a more solid black Panamanian identity. Knowing one's history serves two main purposes - it educates the young and it shapes their identity. Our youths (like we did) need realities, a history they can believe in otherwise they will never learn the meaning of citizenship in Panama. We must do this ourselves in order to begin taking control of our destiny! Only by careful study of ourselves, the life

our forbears were forced to lead and the sources that created their struggles in the first place, can we arrive at proper remedial procedures for our current crises. Those in denial would prefer that we sidestep the atrocities of slavery, acts of injustice, and other controversies to avoid offense and accept silence in these matters as a fixed policy. However, it's a proven fact that people find their places in the world through proper education and knowledge of themselves.

Given the current lack of any school system to educate the young, we should attempt to create community-mentoring programs. The expansion of the SAMAAP Museum coupled with the creation of other community learning centers, we believe, could serve well in this regard for disseminating 'our story' and reinforcing our true identity. There is no 'quick fix' or 'one glove fits all' band-aid procedure to address all our problems (civic, historical, political, economical, educational, etc.) Long-term planning, with proper prioritizing and effective monitoring are keys to any successful program. We must realize that our cultural decay has taken centuries to do its damage and positive/effective changes may not be realized for years to come. But please, not hundred of years as the *white Jamaican* suggested below. The following describes the manner in which we were exploited by the British, American, and Panamanian elites, as well as how they really felt about us.

The British Elites!

The British elites were proud of their exploitative accomplishments in dealing with the Negroes in their colonies and always thought they did a better job than the other Colonial elites of enslaving the freedmen's minds to the point whereby the masses would, over time, forget that they were once slaves.

The freedmen were pictured as human beings of the lower order, unable to subject passion to reason, and, therefore, useful only when made the hewers of wood and the drawers of water for others. They began the process of 'mis-educating' innocent people who did not know what was happening by not allowing them to think for themselves and to maintain paternity.

They used intermediate groups as a buffer to reduce friction and unpleasantness between them and the

black masses. They incorporated the light skinned blacks (*mulattoes*) into the bureaucracies to help keep the black majority at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In addition, some Jewish, Spanish, Portuguese and Middle Eastern families who had become racially mixed identified with the elites and reinforced the system of white rule. These were so-called *white WIs*. They also scrupulously used black foremen to create and build a mystique of fairness. By doling out favors and privileges to these groups, the British could continue to run the Islands without excessive administrative costs. This allowed the elites to remain on a pedestal while concealing their disdain toward their black WI subjects.

Again, the British also built up localist feelings and promoted rivalry among the Islands. After several generations of such peaceful rivalry, the WIs found it hard to get along with one another. As such, jealousy still remains an obstacle to black solidarity today. They also developed a labor system that relied on cajolery, flattery, and tokenism, which (tokenism in particular) remain our "Achilles heels" today. Pay and productivity remained extremely low throughout the post emancipation Caribbean. Tens of thousands of black workers voted with their feet by migrating to Central America and other parts. Occasionally, so many left that crops at home were neglected and endangered. The planters would import indentured workers from India and the Middle East to cover labor shortages. This solution created an effective third-country labor system with a divided and powerless work force. Due to this fact, Trinidad and Guyana became segmented societies of this kind even today.

On their arrival in Panama, the *Silvermen* themselves, rarely knew how the British really felt about them. Occasionally their true feelings came out. One Foreign Office functionary wrote on the cover of a note from Panama, "The petitioners, who are probably niggers seem to think that 'British protection' means an alteration of the laws of Panama to suit them." A few years later Governor Oliver of Jamaica inspected the CZ and found: "*The episode (building of the canal) has been educational both for WIs as workers and for Americans as employers of color-ed labor...the methods and manners of white U.S. foremen in dealing with Negroes have been very wholesomely civilized. This...is... destined to be...a chapter in the development of the transplanted African race and its relations with white races in the new world.*"

Another observer claimed, "It is really only Englishmen that can manage colored labor...The WI Negro has been subjected to kindness and strict justice... tempered with a little wit and sarcasm."

Following the 1920 WI strike against the canal, a visiting white Jamaican observed that the workers were "Still the 'white man's burden' and it will be hundreds of years before they cease to be."

The *Silvermen* saw British racial and colonial policy as very different from that of the American treatment of blacks, and they tended to idealize this view after being on the Zone. They remembered with nostalgia the island societies and the peculiar tolerance they had enjoyed. This romanticization of British colonial treatment caused the *Silvermen* to remain loyal to the British Empire and its symbols. This had two effects: it undoubtedly gave WI immigrants a sense of security in difficult times, and made them more demanding of racial equality in the CZ, yet naïve in their expectations. For example, many were satisfied when canal officials acted with paternalism reminiscent of the British. (From "Yes, Mastah," to "Yes, Sir.") They lost touch with rising Black Nationalism and labor militancy elsewhere. These innovations had to be introduced in Panama by Marcus Garvey in the 1920s, the NAACP in the 1940s, and black American leaders in the 1950s. Second, The WIs' attachment to British colonial racial practices made it difficult for them to get along with the Panamanians, who saw them as subservient and obsequious, willing to be trampled under foot by the 'gringos.'

The American Elites!

Quick background: The Spanish American War served as the catalyst of U.S. Imperialism in the region. After 3 months they were able to gain Puerto Rico, Philippines and Guyana as colonies and Cuba as a protectorate. It was the white man's burden to rule inferior people. U.S. imperialism was indeed racist. In the name of progress and civilization, U.S. diplomats, military officers, missionaries, business executives, academics and laboring adventurers (most *Zonians*) controlled and exploited people of other races believing it was in the latter's best interest. Neither the American people nor their leaders were consciously malevolent, yet their assumption that nonwhite was inferior led to racist and atro-

cious behavior on the part of their representatives abroad.

The *Zonians* took advantage of the cheap labor and distance from Washington to create a life of relative luxury for employees who were U.S. citizens. The WI blacks to whom they applied the Jim Crow laws bore little resemblance to the blacks in the U.S. Initially, the laboring white American males were thrown into a confusing racial and cultural setting, and wished to minimize contact with people unlike themselves, especially Negroes. The WI workers brought a different concept of race relations from the Islands than what they were used to dealing/not dealing with black America.

Harry A. Franck, a well-known travel writer who served as a CZ Police Officer during the construction era wrote- with sarcasm- of the British subjects:

Thanks to their good fortune in being ruled over by the world best colonist, could almost invariably read and write; many of those shoveling the "cut" have been trained in trigonometry.

Within months after beginning construction, canal administrators established the system of racial distinctions. Gold-silver segregation, rationalized as local custom, accomplished the isolation of whites from blacks the Americans apparently desired. The southerners among canal managers helped mold the system into a replica of Jim Crow. A high level of antagonism prevailed, exacerbated by the hardships of the construction camp setting. Whites treated blacks harshly, and white children learned to bully black children. Disparities in living conditions convinced the next generation of whites born on the Zone, that they were entitled and superior to blacks. Only then --in the 1930s--did whites display the benevolent paternalism toward blacks with which southerners justified their superior status. The fact that silver workers were not U. S. citizens kept the *Zonians'* paternalism on a formal level. As the descendants of WIs became integrated into Panamanian society, formality between the races stiffened and benevolence waned.

Because racial attitudes were becoming less acceptable in the U.S., *Zonians* needed to buttress the gold-silver division with other justifications. At various times they cited differences of nationality, tropical

climate, customs, and physiology as reasons for the segregation of workers. Their racial ideology became so rigid that they could not relinquish it when pressured to do so by the evolution of U.S. civil rights laws and developments in the U.S. - Panamanian affairs.

During the construction, black children marked time in overcrowded rooms using cast-off supplies from white schools. The textbooks were designed to study the Europeans as examples to emulate. In this regard, we were educated in a system that justified slavery, peonage and segregation. They, of course, assured that the history and status of the Negro should not be made part of the curriculum. Most of us learned oral/contemporary history from our families as well as on the streets, providing us over time with a distorted/truncated view of our past.

The CZ school superintendent, David O'Connor stated: "The present public school system is essentially American, conducted by Americans, supplied with American methods, with American songs and literature, which should in a short time affect the pupils with American ideals and Patriotism."

The Panamanian Elites!

Panamanian attitudes toward blacks formed the third element in the complex racial equation of WIs on the canal. Before 1903, when Panama was part of Colombia, race was a minor factor in the affairs of Panama. The elites, descendants of Spanish colonists, prided themselves on racial purity but accepted nonwhites as necessary in politics and business. *Mulattoes* and *Mestizos* enjoyed social acceptance. Among the middle and lower classes, miscegenation had produced a highly mixed population, especially in the cities. Indeed, Colombia called Panama their black province. Two *mulattoes* had been governors in the province; several held management positions with the Panama Railroad, and one owned the country's leading newspaper.

Panamanians, like most Latin Americans, had a racial ideology quite distinct from the Anglo Saxon one. They relied on somatic indicators to distinguish among the races and possessed a wide spectrum of designations. They had inherited from colonial times an ethic (not always practiced) of interracial harmony that discouraged segregation. This tradition had

been strengthened during the Enlightenment and following independence from Spain. Panamanians were less exposed to racist biological theories popular in Europe around the turn of the century and thus had little intellectual basis for racism. So for those reasons, Panamanian social thought was largely integrationist with regard to race.

After the U.S. began building the canal, however, Panama's elite displayed some of the race prejudices that had been latent earlier. They realized that the Zonian elites preferred to deal with whites, so they gradually adopted a policy favoring whites in high government posts and in diplomatic corps. In the early years the Americans reinforced this preference by favoring the Conservative Party (largely made up of white families) over the Liberals, which included many mixed-bloods. The apexes of the two social pyramids leaned toward each other and formed a bond. The racial policies that flowed from that arrangement soon permeated both societies. Then, when the canal laid off thousands of workers, after construction ended, jobs became scarcer, and hard times set in, especially after 1920. Some labor leaders and politicians began blaming the WIs, and soon anti-emigrant sentiment laced with racism spread throughout the general public. People called them *chombos* (niggers) and other derogatory names and made jokes about Negroid features. The easy-going tolerance of racial diverse people disappeared. Nonetheless, Panamanian racism never took on the harsh, rigid character of the Zone segregation. However, the Panamanian elites came to resent intensely the presence of Negroes in their midst, and they realized only too well that there is a danger of them imparting an African taint to the whole population. In 1930, Abel Villejas Arango, the editor of *El Diario*, denounced the WI community in especially derogatory terms, using epithets as *meco* (black) and *chombo*. Called to task by the *Panama Tribune*, he explained in a letter.

"There can be no prejudice where there is such a wide chasm of religious, social and racial features between the white Panamanians and the colored WI. Prejudice is envy, and this can only exist between two communities of similar racial, cultural and financial standing."

Panama's National Assembly, consisted of what was described as "wild, inexperienced, ignorant, and self serving men," passed legislation barring naturaliza-

tion of persons of prohibited immigration, the main target being the WI.

In 1941, Ricardo Adolfo de la Guardia declared the WI population sub-humans who bore children twice a year.

Only when the Panamanian elites saw their interests as antithetical to those of the Zone elites and broke the bond, did rivalry for the allegiance of the non-white majority begin.

However, the very different ideologies and behaviors hindered the acceptance of WIs in Panama, because an entire new generation of leaders had to grow to maturity before compromise became possible. When that occurred, the *Criollos* generation and Panamanians became allied against CZ practices.

Any immigrant group retains its culture for a time. The length depends upon the difficulties of assimilation and integration and the security afforded by the new homeland. Through the 1920s, *Jamaicans*, *Barbadians*, *Martinicians*, and others, formed their associations and maintained their respective island traditions. Ethnic, religious and language differences kept the *Silvermen* separate. If necessary, they could all work together, as during the 1920 strike. But when Panamanians branded them as undesirable in 1926 and began threatening deportation, the WIs coalesced into a defensive unity. The common danger overcame their differences. Broader-based pressure groups arose, the West Indian weekly *Panama Tribune* began publication, local schools were founded, and a new subculture was born.

Schools became beacons that guided the CZ's WIs through the stormy 1930s and 1940s. When the industrial education swept the U.S. by storm, Osborne and other *Criollo* leaders began to change the course of study for the blacks to make the training for our generation to conform to this policy. Leonore Jump and George Westerman collected funds to buy 1,000 books emphasizing black studies and got the canal to open a public library in La Boca. The black community on the Zone began to be viewed as a vibrant and progressive working community. The evildoers on the Zone, however, will soon slow that process down by drastically overhauling the colored curriculum to Spanish instruction --making it extremely difficult for the CZ black teachers-- so that the children

could make the move to the Panamanian school system. The next step was a significant 'Depopulation' (reduction of WI housing on the CZ).

This unique WI subculture borrowed from a variety of traditions, British, Caribbean, North American and Panamanian. However, this synthesis was also only fleeting, because too many contradictory elements were hastily thrown together. Its guardedness discouraged creative interaction among the parts, so when the danger passed in the 1950s, it gradually disintegrated. This subculture was above all a response to Panamanian chauvinism and to American mistreatment. As the majority gained acceptance beyond the Zone in Panama itself, the defensive solidarity of the 1930s and 1940s became unnecessary and even a hindrance to integration.

Torrijos & the Panamanian Mulattoes!

Omar Torrijos stole pages from the British doctrines and used us as pawns in his successful attempt to rid the nation of U.S. dominance. He used the *mulattoes* as a buffer to reduce friction and unpleasantness between him and the black masses. He also incorporated selected blacks into his government to build a mystique of fairness and caring regarding the black communities. He doled out favors and privileges to those individuals.

In a special issue of the Ministry of Education's cultural journal, Alberto Smith, Melva Lowe and others explored the question of national identity and integration. Smith, an architect with the army in the Zone, rejected the view that persons of WI descent were not more than CZ Negroes who could never become good Panamanian citizens. What most Latin writers claimed as "pure Panamanian" represented a myth of some Hispanic-American thinkers long out of touch with the modern world, an idealization like *Hispanidad*. Smith said that canal employees and their descendants had invested as much in the nation as anyone else and should not be seen as unpatriotic because they spoke English. Moreover, he noted that racial discrimination existed, even to the extent of keeping children of WIs out of public schools. He found racism in popular literature too. He concluded that miscegenation could not be stopped and was producing a new people in the Americas. He urged *Latinos* to stop judging the *Criollos* according to antiquated ideals of racial and cultural purity and to be-

gin to accept and build upon opportunities offered by a peaceful blending of peoples. Melva Lowe focused on the strong official stance in favor of the Spanish language as a criterion for discrimination against persons of WI descent. She argued that to pursue this policy would deprive the nation of valuable human resources. She and other *Afro-Panamanians* urged their Latin counterparts to accept them as they were and to recognize their contributions--past and future--to the nation.

Juan Materno Vásquez formulated a reply on behalf of a dozen or so black government officials who did not accept the charge that Latin Panamanians practice racial discrimination. Materno Vásquez's 1974 booklet entitled, *Pais por conquistar* had triggered much debate by insisting that all groups had to conform to the Hispanic culture. He responded to the Smith and Lowe essays by saying that Panama had fought long and hard to establish a separate national identity, based on Spanish language, Catholic religion, a distinctive folk culture, and the struggle against U.S. domination. According to this definition (and he cited several other authorities on the subject), those of WI descent could never fit in without changing their ways. Panama had gone more than halfway by enacting extremely liberal laws on citizenship and naturalization. He ended by inviting Smith and Lowe to rethink their position and to work toward integration as he defined it.

A year later he hardened the attack, saying that black power and negritude had no place in Panama. The WI descendants could not claim loyalty to the nation when they jumped at the chance to go to the U.S. Nor could they contribute to the culture, because "The illiterate cannot communicate in writing. The ignorant cannot transmit wisdom." They had acted unpatriotic by opposing Panama's position in treaty negotiations. Their accusations of discrimination were insincere because they did not encompass plans to assimilate. He even dismissed the supposed contribution of building the canal, because their ancestors came as cheap laborers without any sense of permanence or belonging. Materno Vásquez spoke as a government representative but was not its sole voice by any means.

When Torrijos encouraged us to form the two organizations (*ARENEP* & *APODAN*) it was a calculated effort to keep us divided. The name of the

first organization, *ARENEP*, has a revealing history. After his return to Panama in 1974, Leroy Gittens gained attention by debating with *Latins* about race issues on the radio. Soon two leaders from Rio Abajo recruited him to help form a group to be named *Acción Reivindicadora del Chombo*. They chose Gittens, an outgoing and well-known singer, as president. They also decided to emphasize the derogatory term *chombo* as a rebuke and in defiance of Latin discrimination. The government responded by sending out its top black officials to urge them to change the organization's potentially embarrassing name. In a meeting attended by a large number of civil servants, the name was changed to *Acción Reivindicadora del Negro Panameño*. Gittens spoke with Torrijos, who did not like the possible challenge of a black movement. The latter persuaded Gittens to reach out to the employees of the CZ. He should convince them that the government would respect their interests in treaty talks.

Gittens mounted a whirlwind campaign in late 1977 to garner support for the treaty. He served as liaison for several black leaders from the U.S., including Jesse Jackson, who visited Panama just after the plebiscite. Gittens took much of the language of Carter's human rights approach and adapted it to the WI community. Then, when Torrijos returned from talks in the U.S., *ARENEP* strung banners at the airport proclaiming, "*Chombos* support the general!" *ARENEP*'s publicity appeared in the government newspaper, *La Republica*, successor of the *Panama-American*. This would suggest that while Torrijos probably did not like the outbreak of ethnic and racial politics, he nevertheless channeled them in directions supportive of the government.

Gittens most ambitious project, a consumer cooperative in the local-rate communities destined to be turned over to Panama, failed after six months. Residents of the former areas, who were scheduled to lose commissary rights, lived far from shopping areas in Panama. Gittens reasoned that if *ARENEP* and the government could run a coop, they could ease the transition and overcome the residents' opposition to the treaty. He approached leaders of Local 900 and 907 and the NMU, who showed little enthusiasm for the scheme. After he had spent much time and money on the project, Gittens realized that the local-raters of the Zone simply would not trust him because of his links to the government. (To be continued.)