

# San Raphael's mystery tomb

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THERE is a tomb at a cemetery in San Raphael, in Trinidad's rural interior, that is enclosed in an iron cage.

The bars, however, were not placed there to keep thieves away from an expensive marble tombstone or velvet-lined wooden casket.

Village lore is that the cage keeps the body of the man buried there from climbing out at nights and harassing people.

Reyes Marin, 70, caretaker of the San Raphael RC church, said "My parents told me about the tomb when I was a child, and they used to warn me to keep away from the cemetery because the tomb was haunted."

He said the body is that of a man from the village of Mundo Nuevo. Marin does not know the man's name, but villagers had complained that at nights they would see him sitting on the tomb, and sometimes walking through the cemetery.

"Everybody in the village was scared to come out at nights because of this," Marin said.

After a prolonged period, the villagers decided to erect an elevated tomb with a metal cage around it, and have the priest perform an exorcism (evicting a demon from a person or place believed to be possessed).

Martin said since this was done the man has never appeared.

When the *Express* first visited the tomb it was covered completely with vines and bushes.

Employees of the Ministry of Works, after requests, cleaned up the grave site last Tuesday and found a broken marble stone with Spanish writing. It showed that a man and a woman were buried there. The tomb was dated June 1908.

Commenting on the scary village story, Fr Allan Ventour of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Roman Catholic church, San Fernando, said, "I have heard of similar cases. Some of them were very strange, and when the soul was exorcised the person went to rest peacefully."

Originally an Amerindian settlement San Raphael was given its name by the Spanish who occupied the area in the 17th century.

There were two major events that took place in the area. Firstly, there



was the Arena massacre in 1699 in which three priests, a Spanish governor and other officials were killed by the native Indians. Then came the decline in the price of cacao and the closure of the cocoa estates in the village.

San Raphael entered the 20th century as one of the most important cocoa producing areas.

Workers came from mainland South America to work on these estates.

"The last remaining

estate, San Raphael Estate, consisting of 77 acres, was owned by Bobby Luces who died three years ago at age 104," said his daughter Marie Solozano.

Luces's funeral was a village affair, with drumming, music and street dancing that lasted for one week before he was buried in the cemetery.

For the greater part of his life, Luces lived in a house opposite the church. Situated at the entrance of the village, the church is the most dominant building in the village. It is of Gothic design, built by Fr Joseph Perdemo in 1895, but refurbished several times.

Perdemo served as parish priest for 36 years, and after his death he was buried under the sanctuary of the church. The stained glass at the back of the altar is reminiscent of the period when saints were dis-



'STRANGE STORIES': Fr Allan Ventour

played as part of the church décor.

Dominating the entrance to the village is a statue of Saint Raphael, patron saint of the village. Raphael means "God heals" and the name was given by early Spanish administrators. September 29 is the feast day of St Raphael and on that day Christians pay homage to him for healing the sick.

San Raphael is located about five miles south of the borough of Arima. It is the main entrance to the Caroni Arena Dam which provides water to north and central Trinidad. The dam was constructed in the late 1970s, early 80s, and in addition to its function as a water provider, it has facilities for camping and picnicking. The nearby Arena forest is protected and serves as



LANDMARK: The San Raphael Catholic church stands in the heart of the village and serves many in the community.

watershed for the dam.

Not far from San Raphael is the site of the 1699 massacre. The bones of one of the murdered monks can be seen in a special glass container at the church.

Culturally, the village is well known for its parang music. Marin, a member of a parang group at San Raphael, said over the years there have been many changes from the original music

and dress code of the parranderos.

He said, "We used to dress in black or dark blue suits, white shirts and brightly coloured cravats or ties. Every member of the group ensured that they were wearing a beautifully laundered shirt, in case his host asked whether any of them wished to remove his jacket."

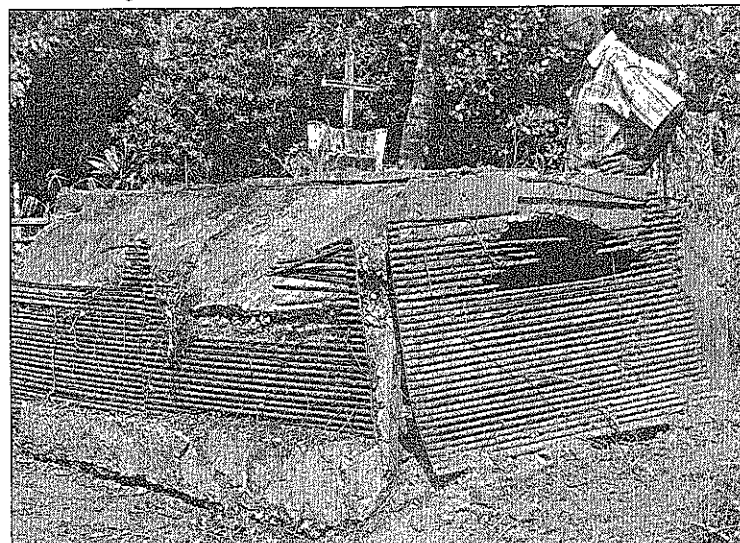
Over time San Raphael has moved from

its cocoa panyol (an ethnic mix of European, Amerindian and African) past. The young people in the village now take part in a number of cultural activities, but have retained the culture and Spanish food preparation left by their forebears.

Most of the residents with links to Amerindian tribes have since moved to other districts.



BEFORE CLEAN-UP: Caretaker of the San Raphael Catholic church, Reyes Marin, picks his way through thick bushes to inspect the tomb in the village cemetery when the *Express* first visited the community. Many villagers believed the tomb was cursed.



CURRENT STATE: This is what the tomb now looks like after Ministry of Works employees cleaned it up last week.