

# Tabaquite once a centre of Chinese commerce

**Louis B Homer**  
South bureau

TABAQUITE is now a shadow of its glorious past.

Like many villages in Trinidad, it owes its existence to the cacao industry, and later the discovery of oil in commercial quantities.

The cacao industry was supported largely by the railway system which reached the village in 1898.

The new system, which was greeted with great jubilation by the cacao planters and commuters, facilitated the transport of the "golden beans" from the village to Port of Spain.

Greater fortunes came to the village around 1913 when oil was discovered in commercial quantities.

Trinidad Central Oilfields was formed by Alexander Duckham with a capital of 50,000 pounds sterling to explore for crude oil.

The first well drilled at Tabaquite was number five, to a depth of 600 feet and came into production in 1913, flowing 150 barrels a day for one year.

The following year, 1914, a permit to build a refinery was approved.

In 1919, the rate of production declined, and by 1939 the Tabaquite field was closed.

The oil refinery at Tabaquite was one of the earliest, produced oil of a high quality and the gasoline refined from the crude was sold as Tricentrol.

Discovery of oil brought several Chinese shopkeepers to the rural village.

They were the ones who developed the retail business in many parts of Tabaquite.

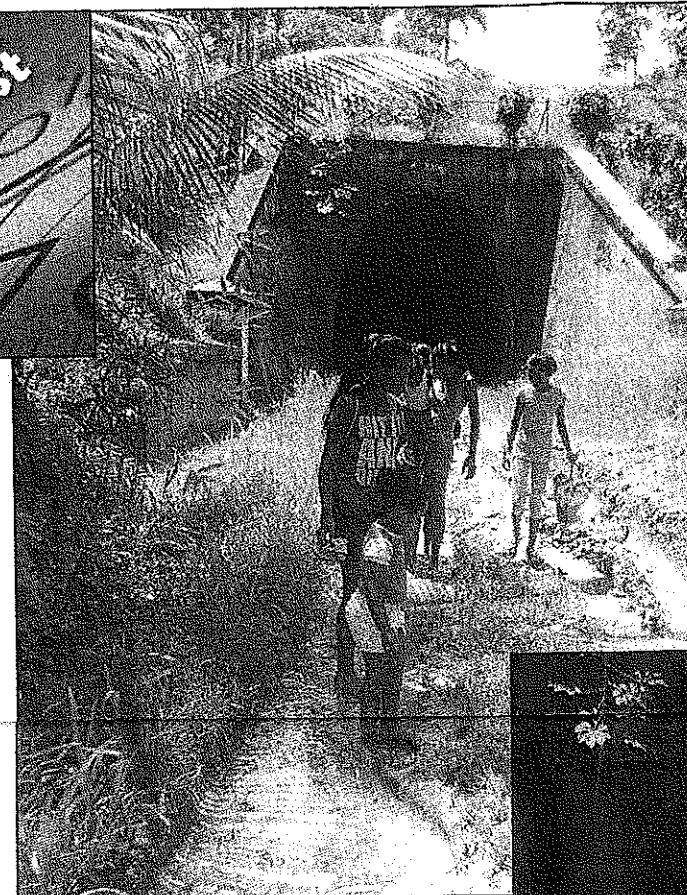
But as far as the Chinese were concerned, the village was known to them as "The University of West Indian Chinese Commerce".

Winston Hayden Chang Jr, a member of the Chinese Hakka shopkeepers group, in writing about the legacy of the Hakkas, stated, "In the 1940s, many Hakka Chinese went to Tabaquite to acclimatise themselves with the West Indian culture and to learn English and business practices. When the cacao trade declined, many of the families went on to become very successful entrepreneurs in other parts of Trinidad."

Chang stated: "It was in the shops of Tabaquite that they learned to speak English, count money in sterling (pounds, shillings and pence), sell products of the shop, deal with the local population, and, most importantly, they networked with other Hakkas from China."

Hakka (also pronounced Hagga) were the early Chinese shopkeepers' descendants of the Han and were noted for their unique cul-

Remembering  
Our Past



EXPLORING: Children, above and right, visit the tunnel at Tabaquite. —Photos: LOUIS B HOMER

tural characteristics in foods, and customs. In early China, they were considered outsiders, and were forced to settle on the less fertile lands.

Chang stated that during the 1940s, "revolutionaries pillaged their villages in China and often raised funds by kidnapping residents for ransom."

Deo Rampersad, 85, now residing at Leemong Trace, Tabaquite, recalled that the Chinese businessmen increased in numbers after the discovery of oil.

"There were more than five large Chinese shops trading in cacao. Clifton Chang operated as the honorary Chinese ambassador. He was assisted by a man called Ivan Chin Fatt in teaching the newly arrived Chinese workers."

He said Chin Fatt, on arrival in Trinidad, had settled in Barataria, and then he moved to Tabaquite.

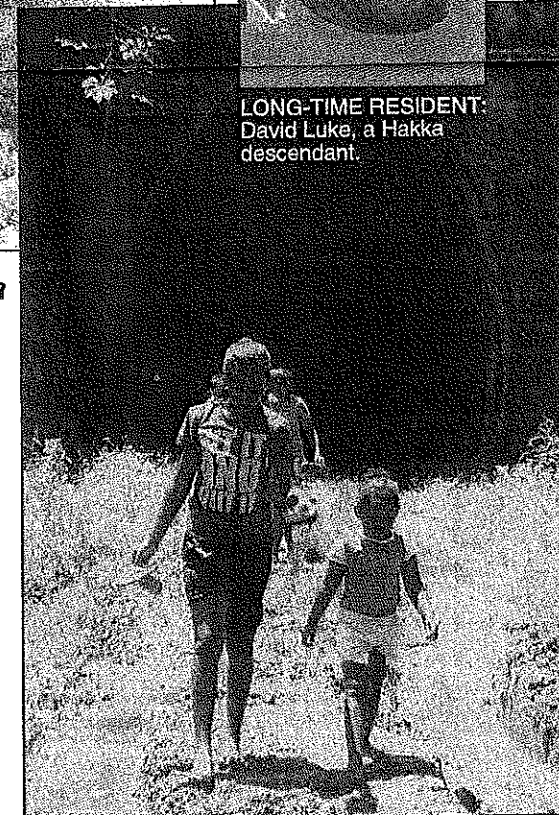
Rampersad said: "Teacher James Chattergoon and Miss Chin Cheung were the ones who taught the Chinese to speak English."



REMINISCING:  
Deo Rampersad



LONG-TIME RESIDENT:  
David Luke, a Hakka descendant.



The Chinese of Tabaquite migrated from the village following the decline of the oil and cacao industries.

The cacao industry also brought several cocoa panyols to the village.

David Luke, a long-time resident, said the cacao estates were looked after by the panyols.

His grandfather, David Luke, owned several acres of cacao which were cultivated by the panyols.

"They brought to the village parang, maypole and other cultural practices, and, when they left, their offspring continued the traditions. It still have plenty panyol scattered all over the village."

He said, in the height of the cacao season, scores of families came to live in the village and they used to keep the place lively.

Also bringing their special talents to the village were goldsmiths and people skilled in making ceramics.

Luke said one of the most outstanding goldsmiths in the village was an East Indian man named Chatoorgoon.

"People from all over Trinidad used to come here for Chatoorgoon to make beras (bracelets) and chains."

Rampersad, who was born in the village, said, "The only evidence of Amerindian occupation is the naming of Leemong Street. Many of the Amerindians used to live on Leemong Road, and that is how the road got its name."

He said that 'leemong' was the Amerindian word for lime.

The closure of the railway to Tabaquite in 1965 brought an end to "the most reliable system of transportation".

He said: "We were very proud of the tunnel which was the first in Trinidad."

The tunnel, named after Governor Courtney Knollys, was opened in 1898.

The tunnel was constructed under a hill which barred the entrance to Tabaquite.

"Many people use to come to the village just to ride through the tunnel," said Rampersad.

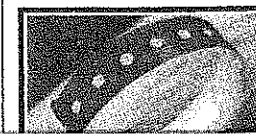
The tunnel and its environs were once a tourist attraction but are neglected now. Even the road leading to the tunnel is in need of resurfacing.

Another project that brought economic fortunes to Tabaquite was the Navet Dam, a beautiful lake on the edge of virgin forests, which supplies water to most of the southern districts in Trinidad.

Built in 1965 and expanded in 1976, it has a capacity of 400 million gallons of water.

If the name Tabaquite conjures up visions of cacao estates and abandoned oil wells, verdant landscapes, rustic idyllic and old-fashioned values, then Tabaquite lives up to all those expectations.

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