

# FROM THE CHAMBER POT TO THE COMPUTER IN GUYANA

By Dmitri Allicock - for Guyanese Online

Guyanese children, accustomed to microwave ovens, computers, fast food and cell phones, are truly fascinated by the artifacts of their culture and time. It prompts the older generations to reminisce on the changes that they have experienced and how technology, or its absence, has affected their lives and the lives of their descendants. So many of yesterdays comforts are now obsolete and being rapidly lost to the fog of history.

Social historians tell us that the artifacts of a culture offer the most revealing evidence about what a given society was like and how its people lived. The implements, utensils, and devices people used in or out of their homes have been a major source of such evidence. The technological revolution did not leave Guyana or Guyanese behind and the fun loving gadgetry and comforts of the modern age is very much a part of life. Different eras of political history are frequently identified with royal dynasties, or great wars and revolutions. Eras in the history of art and architecture may be distinguished by styles such as Renaissance, Gothic, Impressionist or Surrealist, and so on. Techniques too have marked different eras over the centuries: from the primitive tools of the Stone Age, to the Industrial Age marked by steam and electrical power and the discovery of turbines, and engines. Today, we have entered a new era: **the computer age**.- The age of unlimited information, super highways of warped speed and communication which ‘Captain Kirk of the Star Ship Enterprise’ would be proud of.

While the modern age of wizardry appliances and technology is available to Guyanese, it still remains a country of contrasting means and methods. There is nothing more fascinating for an older Guyanese to discuss or look at some of the implements and devices which we once used. The article of the antique “Berbice Chair” and its response, gave me this idea of showcasing some of Guyana’s vintage which once govern life only a few generations ago.

The general name for the hand-held iron was **The Flat Iron**, consisting simply of a handle and a solid, flat, metal base, and named for the flat ironing face used to smooth clothes. Several Flat



Irons was heated directed by the charcoals in the coal pot. The Iron was held by a thick pad, removed from the heated coals and wiped with a cloth laced with a few drops of oil, soft grease or animal fat before pressing clothing.

**The Charcoal Iron** was more expensive and generally used by tailors who fashioned some of the best suits ever made. These charcoal irons were used in the Victorian epoch which represented an age of elaborate and elegant fashion.

The history of the Guyana's **Coalpot** is obscure but the form itself indicates that the clay versions produced today evolved as copies of colonial-era iron coal pots, and they did not enter the archeological record until the nineteenth century. There are many examples of clay braziers and cook stoves in northern and western Africa, with those from Nigeria and Cameroon bearing remarkably similar shapes to the coalpots of the Caribbean.



The historical relationship between clay and metal versions of the cook stove is very hard to follow, and continues into the present as inexpensive iron coal pots are now made in Guyana. The abundance of wood for charcoal making would see the coal pot dominate a significant period of Guyana's life. The coal pot was used for cooking and for baking. The pot with glowing embers of coal was placed into a wood crafted box- oven, lined with asbestos and zinc sheeting. When a uniform temperature was reached, this oven made some of the tastiest bread and pastries of Guyana. This method is still limitedly used in outlying and other regions of the country and is now complimented with a variety of other systems of cooking and baking.

**The Cast Iron Wood Burning Stove** was primarily used in the early part of the 1900s. Here again, the wood of Guyana featured extensively. Bundles of wood and charcoal were common and conveniently sold at the market. This stove required duct work and a chimney for the escape of the smoke. All the Demerara Bauxite Company houses, built for their workers of Upper Demerara, came equipped with this wood burning stove that was safe to use despite the open fire of the now attached kitchen.



Until the 18th century, food was cooked over an open fire. Technical advances in heating food in the 18th and 19th centuries changed the architecture of the kitchen. Before the introduction of modern pipes, water was brought from outdoor sources such as creeks, springs or collected from the rain by the large vat or other receptacles.



Kitchens throughout the ages have changed with the technology and social norms of the day. Once relegated to the back of the house or unattached, kitchens are now front-and-center living spaces where the whole family can gather. It now commonplace that kitchens are designed with fashionable cabinets, fully equipped with refrigerators, sink, gas or

electric ovens, stove, microwave and other comforts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**The logie** in picture is a kitchen of the Amerindians in Guyana. It was adopted by many in the hinterlands and used very effectively. Unattached from the house and easily vented, a coalpot, fireside and box oven worked perfectly with this set up. Corn or provisions were hung from the roof and matapee strung for cassava bread making. The design practicality and usefulness was best suited for frontier living.

The “**safe**” or kitchen cabinet was used for storage of either food stuff or kitchen essentials.



Utilitarian cabinets like this were no-frills by design and served a purpose, and that was it. They weren't anything pretty to look at.

The colorful **food carrier** came in assorted enamel and aluminum variety. Lunches were made and delivered in these containers to the workers of the many industries.

The **mince grinder** came in different sized and variety. The coffee and cocoa mill were similar but much larger in size. Coffee and cocoa were grown, dried, ground and sold by local farmers in Guyana.





The living room of homes of the early 1900s was pristine and a place where the best vintage furniture were on display. The **old gramophone** was the means of listening to records before electricity. The later elegant and much desired **Radiogram** combined the radio and amplified the gramophone. This wonderful piece of history serenaded generations of Guyanese with some of the very best music every created during the middle to latter half of the last century. Before the invention of the light bulb, illuminating the world after the sun went down was a messy, arduous, hazardous task. It took a bunch of candles or torches to fully light up a good-sized room, and oil lamps, while fairly effective, tended to leave a residue of soot. The simple and **fashionable Epurn kerosene lamps** led the way before electric lighting.



Hand sewing is an art form that is over 20,000 years old. The first sewing needles were made of bones or animal horns and the first thread was made of animal sinew. Iron needles were invented in the 14th century. The first eyed needles appeared in the 15th century.

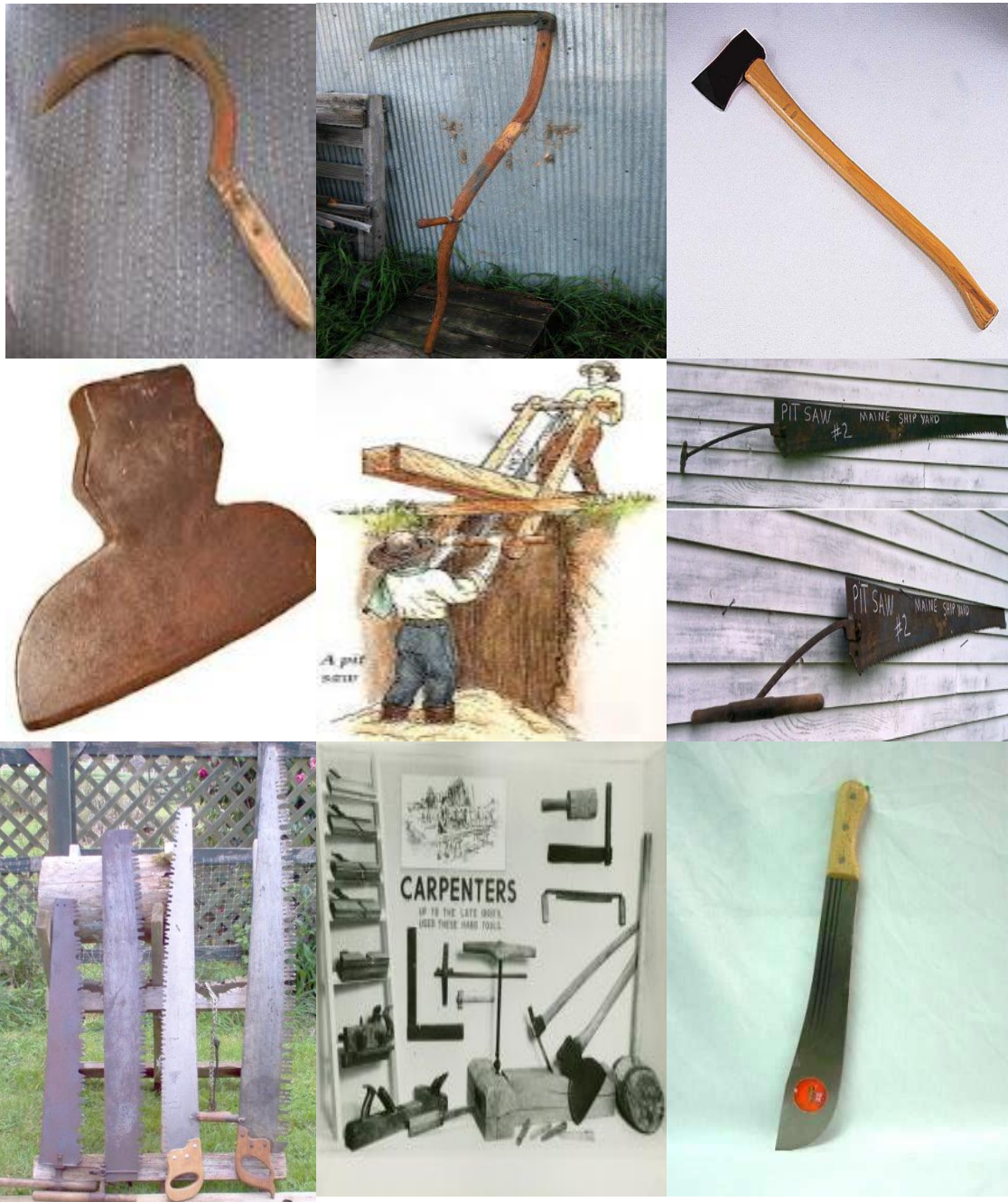
**Sewing machines** did not go into mass production until the 1850's, when Isaac Singer built the first commercially successful machine. Singer built the first sewing machine where the needle moved up and down rather than the side-to-side and the needle was powered by a foot treadle. Previous machines were all hand-cranked. The first sewing machines power by hand crank or feet peddle, were a vital part of many homes. Before the advent of cheap mass produced factory clothing, the faithful sewing machine had the daunting task of keeping Guyanese clothed.

Some of the earlier sewing machines included the *Jones* of the 1870s, the Italian *Nikki* all purposed dominated sale and created a much improved *Singer* Machine. The Swedish *Husquavna* Sewing Machine was a machine which was fancied by many Guyanese.

The birth of the Guyanese Seamstress and Tailor created an entire industry. Many became experts at this special craft, designing world class clothing. The invention of ready-made, cheaply-produced clothes in the middle of the last century has resulted in the demise of the tailor and seamstress. Like the panda and the whooping crane, it has been said, the march of modern life is against them. Today, it is far more expensive to buy the "tailor made" than the cheaper store bought clothes resulting in the demise of the sewing machine.

The **rocking chair** has seen its best days and is rarely seen in homes of Guyana today.

In 1867, a Milwaukee, Wisconsin printer-publisher-politician named Christopher Latham Sholes, with assistance from Carlos Glidden and Samuel Soule, patented what was to be the first useful **typewriter**. It was called the "Sholes & Glidden Type Writer," and it was produced by the gun makers E. Remington & Sons in Iliion, NY from 1874-1878. The type writer would come to dominate written official communication. Many typing schools existed across Guyana where the art of typing, shorthand and longhand writings were also taught. Typewriters have been largely replaced by personal computers and home printers.



The **curve grass knife** was used for cutting grass but was also adapted by some for other uses including reaping crops.

The **Grass Scythe** was the instrument which keep Guyana's parapet, lawn and ball field tidy and neatly trimmed. The word Scythe" derives from Old English. It was spelt *sithe* or *sythe*. However, in the 15th century some writers began to use the *sc-* spelling as they (wrongly) thought the word was related to the Latin *scindere* meaning "to cut"). The razor sharp Grass Scythe is still expertly used throughout Guyana but is slowly being replaced.



The **Pitch** and **Broad axe** has been around since Stone Age man needed a tool capable of spitting wood among other things. This very vital tool would lay the foundation of all society and is still very much a part of life; however, its importance is vastly diminished by the gas powered chainsaw.

The **Pit** and **Cross Cut Saws** probably played a role in all of Guyana's building until recent times. Hardwood was felled by the cross cut saw then the pit saw did its thing for those who prepared their own lumber. The teeth mark of the saw can still be seen on the wood of many older buildings. Modern Saw Mills now prepares most wood for local and international market.

The word **cutlass** developed from a 17th-century English variation of *coutelas*, a 16th-century French word for a machete-like blade. The cutlass is one of the most versatile tools of Guyana. No home is found without this simple but effective tool.

Sugar, exported under the name *Demerara Gold*, the main crop of Guyana and number one foreign exchange earner is still harvested by hand, using the ultimate cutlass despite the availability of mechanized methods. The tool is used for just about anything which requires cutting and it appears that it will be around for a long time to come. It was quite common that the only security provided for a home apart from a dog, was the cutlass, referred to as a *twenty two-* the measurement of the common blade.

The cutlass is used to peel the green coconut and provide Guyana's favorite drink, the coconut water. The cutlass is also used for chopping down weeds, clearing brush, or cutting small limbs and tree branches. It is ideal for handling the ever present deadly reptiles of the land.



The **Pointer {coconut} broom** is made out of the stems of dried coconut leaves. The resourceful coconut palm tree provides endless products and is still a vital part of Guyanese life. The pointer broom is generally used today for sweeping outdoors in Guyana and symbolizes one of the things which make Guyanese abroad feel at home. Many of the Guyanese Diaspora still keeps a pointer brooms around as keep sakes and show pieces to remind them of home and heritage.

The manicole palm also provided a broom though not as elegant as the coconut. The manicole broom is used for sweeping outdoors and also serves as a deterrent by the believers of the feared spook, the old soul or witch called Ole Higue {Old Hag.}



The hand cranked **Grinding Stone {Wheel}** was used for sharpening farming tools primarily. Mounted on a wooden structure, the wheel was hand cranked as the tool sharpened. This was the method used by the earlier generations of Guyanese farmers before the file became commonplace. It was a simple and effective device which did the job. A grinding stone literally outlived its owner and was shared with many.



Toilet is part of history of human hygiene which is a critical chapter in the history of human civilization and which cannot be isolated to be accorded unimportant position in history. Toilet is a critical link between order and disorder and between good and bad environment.

Unlike body functions like dance, drama and songs, defecation is considered very low. As a result very few scholars documented precisely the toilet habits of our predecessors. The Nobel Prize winner for Medicine (1913) Charles Richet attributes this silence to the disgust that arises from noxiousness and lack of usefulness of human waste.



The **Outhouse** is believed to be well over 500 years old and has been around much longer than the modern flush toilet. An outhouse is primarily a hole dug into the ground, into which biological waste solids and liquids are introduced. A small house with a toilet seat was constructed over the hole. The outhouse was strategically placed in a special spot outback in the yard.

Sir John Harrington invented the forerunner of today's flush toilet and Thomas Crapper is credited with coming up with the modern toilet. Their names "*John*" and *Crapper* are synonymous with the toilet today. King Minos of Crete had the first flushing water closet recorded in history and that was over 2800 years ago. A toilet was discovered in the tomb of a Chinese king of the Western Han Dynasty that dates back to 206 BC to 24 AD. The ancient Romans had a system of sewers. They built simple outhouses or latrines directly over

the running waters of the sewers that poured into the Tiber River.



The Wooden Outhouse became a part of Guyana landscape and history before being slowly replaced by the modern toilet with septic tank.

### **THE PASSING OF THE OUTHOUSE**

James Whitcomb Riley

We had our Posey garden  
That the women loved so well  
I loved it too but better still  
I loved the stronger smell  
That filled the evening breezes  
So full of homely cheer  
And told the night-o'ertaken tramp  
That human life was near.  
On lazy August afternoons:  
It made a little bower  
Delightful, where my grandsire sat  
And whiled away an hour  
For there the summer morning  
It's very cares entwined.  
And berry bushes reddened  
In the teeming soil behind  
All day fat spiders spun their webs  
To catch the buzzing flies  
That flitted to and from the house  
Where Ma was baking pies  
And once a swarm of hornets bold  
Had built a palace there  
And stung my unsuspecting aunt –  
I must not tell you where.  
Then father took a flaming pole  
That was a happy day –  
He nearly burned the building up  
But the hornets left to stay.  
When summer bloom began to fade  
And winter to carouse,  
We banked the little building  
With a heap of hemlock boughs  
But when the crust was on the snow  
And the sullen skies were gray,  
In sooth the building was no place  
Where one could wish to stay  
We did our duties promptly;  
There one purpose swayed the mind.  
We tarried not nor lingered long  
On what we left behind

The torture of that icy seat  
Would made a Spartan sob,  
For needs must scrape the gooseflesh  
With a lacerating cob  
That from a frost-encrusted nail  
Was suspended by a string –  
My father was a frugal man  
And wasted not a thing  
When grandpa had to “go out back”  
And make his morning call,  
We’d bundled up the dear old man  
With a muffler and a shawl  
I knew the hole on which he sat  
‘Twas padded all around,  
And once I dared to sit there;  
‘Twas all too wide, I found.  
My loins were all too little  
And I jack-knifed there to stay;  
They had to come and get me out  
Or I’d have passed away.  
Then father said ambition  
Was a thing small boys should shun,  
And I must use the children’s hole  
Till childhood days were done.  
But still I marvel at the craft  
That cut those holes so true;  
The baby hole and the slender hole  
That fitted Sister Sue.  
That dear old country landmark!  
I’ve tramped around a not  
And in the lap of luxury  
My lot has been to sit,  
But ere I die I’ll eat the fruit  
Of trees I robbed of yore,  
Then seek the shanty where my name  
Is carved upon the door  
I ween the old familiar smell  
Will soothe my jaded soul;  
I’m now a man, but none the less  
I’ll try the children’s hole.



**A Chamber Pot** is a portable container used as a toilet in the bedroom. The chamber pot was generally made of metal or ceramic and placed in a piece of furniture such as a bench or stool with a lid for covering the chamber pot. The chamber maids were entrusted with the work of emptying and cleaning the chamber pots.

The chamber pot was called many names in Guyana including “Posey”, “Po”, and “Tenny”. The historical pot dates back to the middle ages. The introduction of inside water closets started to displace chamber pots in the 19th century but such pots were in common use until the mid-20th century. Chamber pots are still used today in the rural areas of Guyana and have been redesigned as the bedpan for use with the very ill around the globe.

Evolutionary theorist, Charles Darwin once said, ***“It is not the strongest of the species that survive, or the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.”*** Since the Industrial Revolution, when the speed of change really started picking up, society has been transforming accordingly. It began with a shift from a rural, agrarian society to an urban, industrial society. Fewer workers were needed to cultivate greater crops, so more people moved to big cities to take factory jobs. That led to a whole range of changes in lifestyle, family structure, culture and values. The computer revolution that started around 25 years ago sent the rate of change into its exponential rise. It is the hope that as we will adapt to the changing world and that we take time out to reflect how far we have come and what may exist beyond the horizon of tomorrow.