

## **Tribute to Winfield Godfrey Chin (1937- 2012)**

### **By Major General (retd) Joseph G Singh**

I am honored to have been invited to pay this Tribute to a man I was privileged to have as a friend for many years. Winfield Godfrey Chin was a man of many talents. I was fortunate to see and marvel at his creativity, to learn from tapping into his prodigious memory, to experience the genuine friendship he extended so unreservedly, and to benefit from his unselfishness and magnanimity.

I had the good fortune of collaborating with him on several exhibitions mounted to coincide with events and commemorative anniversaries and in researching events, people and places, to add to our knowledge of our history, to celebrate our culture and to point out new opportunities for the younger generations to explore. Our engagements were through phone calls, e-mails, clippings and face to face meetings.

As an example, an extract from a book I published, **The Mataruki Trail**, providing details of the contributions made by aviator Colonel Art Williams to the successful execution of the boundary survey between 1936 and 1938 in the South East of Guyana, caught Godfrey's attention and he ferreted out information which led him to being able to contact one of Col Williams' surviving family members in Australia, who provided him with very useful information, including photographs, to be included in an assignment he was undertaking to celebrate 100 years of aviation in Guyana.

When I was looking for historical photographs to complement some work I was researching, he invited me to his then residence in Quamina St where I spent several hours one Saturday morning in August last year, poring over his hundreds of photographs and slides, many of which would qualify for the National Collection.

In paying Tribute I shall highlight three experiences that we shared in common which would perhaps explain why I relished being in his company.

The first shared experience was our familiarity with life in the Range and the Tenement Yard. I had first hand experience of growing up in a room on a Range on the sugar estate at Ogle in the late 1940s and of living in a room in a Range within the Tenement Yard in Leopold and Smyth Street in the late 1950s and early 60s. Godfrey's familiarity with the Tenement Yard commenced in 1940 when his family lived behind the corner parlor in a Tenement Yard owned by Clyde Duncan's grandmother at the north-western corner of East and Murray (now Quamina) Streets. The step to their one room home had two treaders. In 1941 they moved into Tenement Yard number two, which was on Regent Road behind the baker shop, five yards east of Cummings St, on the northern side.

Godfrey wrote that their family of five-parents and three 'pickanees' were moving up in the world as the step to the room in this tenement had three treaders. In 1944 the family again moved and this time to Tenement Yard number three at Murray and Cummings St. This yard comprised Ranges on stilts seven feet above the ground and as Godfrey pointed out, *"the Chins were moving up –the step to the rooms on this Range had at least 10 treaders but was still a tenement yard - galvanise bathroom in the middle of the yard and toilets constructed of corrugated galvanized sheets on a metal frame –but no toilet seats"*.

In 1945, they moved into the front duplex, sharing with another family a common split verandah, living room, and back to back bathrooms upstairs. Godfrey however maintained his relationship with his friends in the Tenement Yard. As he wrote: *"You can take me out of the tenement yard, but you can't take the tenement yard out of me. I have rubbed shoulders with the highest of society - Consuls, Presidents, Ambassadors, dignitaries and business executives, but at the cocktail parties at the Benab, Pegasus or Odo's Residence, I relished and admired the steel orchestras with their professional, skilled dexterity, playing from Mozart to soca by rote.*

*And my heart would swell with pride, like the Essequibo, as out of the tenement yard to the tympani of the steel band we, the small man, have moved up, up, away from our Hell's Kitchen to the upper rounds of Shakespeare's ladder- not for one moment scorning the base degrees from which we did ascend. The upside is*

*that while everyday was ‘push come to shove’, scratching for make-do existence, our humane nature preserved our well-being along righteous paths. Our existence was contrived with humility and ignited ambition’s sterner stuff, with the goal that our offspring would be better off – and they were. The sacrifices to make ends meet, buying two cigarettes and an ounce of coffee at a time, begging for ‘trust’, living day to day on a wing and a prayer – added to the grandeur of life, most worthwhile”.*

For him *“the ring-side view of tenement yard action was exhilarating – life’s lessons learned from a Pandora’s Box of complexities and adversities. Nuff obstacles, yet nuff opportunities”.*

Our second shared experience was when we reminisced on our secondary school days and the lasting impact these had on us in shaping our careers, our attitude to life, our good fortune of having masters who understood and practiced the virtues of exposing us to a rounded education - mixing academics with sports, outdoorsman activities and having fun. While I had ‘down to earth’ masters at QC such as Yango, Eddie London, Bobby Moore, who enhanced and enlivened their tutorship with mentoring us on the practical things in life, Godfrey at Central High School, 90 Smyth St, was fascinated by the Principal Mr. J C Luck.

Godfrey wrote: *“J.C. ever so often would teach a class, and these occasions were like oases in the humdrum of school studies. He loved to share his memories of his early start with a mischievous glint in his friendly eyes, would tell us his deeds as a fresh young cub and of his pioneer days as farmer, shopkeeper, gold digger and rice miller”.*

We also cherished the friendships formed at College and High School which stood the test of time. He wrote: *“My first day at Central High School added a new page to my teen age Book of Life. From Assembly that first day, my life’s path was enriched with hundreds of boys and girls who travelled daily by the coast railways to secure a secondary education. They came from as far as Mahaica/Mahaicony, leaving home as early as 5 a.m. to catch the train, and drop off at Vlissengen Road, Albert St and finally the Terminal at Carmichael St. At just before 8 a.m.,*

*students in a variety of school uniform colours disembarked to rush on feet to Queen's, Bishop's, and St Stanislaus plus the other high schools in the capital city. Their goal in the next few years: – to earn Cambridge School/Higher School Certificate or GCE, the next step towards a career or further higher education. Many became distinguished scholars – icons- and in later years have blazed trails at home and abroad. Were you one of them?"*

The third passion we shared was observation and recording of matters that captured our interest. In my case it was biased towards the rich and diverse landscapes of the hinterland, the personalities with whom I interacted and the events, expeditions and experiences that occurred throughout my decades in the hinterland. We faithfully maintained our notes, diaries, clippings, and photographs and committed a lot to memory - being both blessed with good powers of recall. I have to confess though that I was no match for Godfrey. The breadth of his interests was mind boggling and his documentation of these was unparalleled and unrivaled. It included sports, culture, cinemas, movies, comics, fashion, cook shops, festivals, taxi services, the sea wall experience, nightclubs, memorable happy events and the more traumatic episodes in our recent history. There is no aspect of life in Guyana which has not been captured in his prodigious work: **Nostalgias-Golden Memories of Guyana 1940-1980.**

In his later years Godfrey's knowledge , expertise and creative mind were sought out by corporates wishing to have photographic exhibitions on their significant anniversaries and two such projects he was working on prior to his transitioning, were photographic displays commemorating the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the Guyana Telephone & Telegraph Company, and the Centenary Anniversary of Aviation in Guyana. His mental storehouse of information was phenomenal as was his personal collection of photographs, slides, videos and mementos, all of which he magnanimously made available to those who sought his advice and assistance. His regular public contributions through the newspapers, magazines, radio and TV and his frequent interaction with Guyanese at home and abroad, earned him well deserved recognition, awards such as the Wordsworth McAndrew Award, and genuine respect.

He was a man of many parts - multi talented, generous with his time and unselfish in sharing his knowledge so that generations will be reminded and inspired. He was a humble man and a loyal friend. This likeable *cook shop fly*, this repository of Guyana's modern history, this brilliant historian, social commentator, performing artiste and *raconteur par excellence*, has transitioned from his earthly domain to the spiritual dimension in the good company of Cyril Shaw, another Guyanese icon. There they will reunite with other icons in the many fields of endeavors that have given form and content to our Nation. We are the better for their contribution. Godfrey has left us a rich legacy in his Nostalgias – a treasure trove of information that needs deeper analysis and wider dissemination.

As Professor Vibert Cambridge has written in the Foreword to Nostalgias: *“Godfrey's Nostalgias are participatory, in that they trigger memories from his readers, and sets in train conversation and debate that is invigorating and invaluable”*. **Ya think it easy!**

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