

## Oral History and Informal Education

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One of the nine-year olds commented: “Aunty, you were lucky to be born at that time.” “Yes,” chimed the other.

The adult was surprised at the interpretation/insight. They were sitting around the dining-room table counting the money that the children had recently discovered in a savings tin. The tin was about 40 years and had cost about \$2.50—a small fortune at the time. The children had decided that the activity of counting the money would be a true collaboration. They decided to sort the coins by denomination, and during the sorting they found coins that had been minted shortly after Trinidad and Tobago gained its Independence in 1962 and ones that were minted after the country became a Republic in 1976. This proved to be an ideal opportunity for the adult to elaborate a bit on these events by telling stories that she herself had heard—something of a history lesson. There were the stories of the outdoor cultural programme that marked Independence and stories of the fears associated with Republicanism based on stories emanating from our closest geographic neighbours—Venezuela.

As a child, I too was privy to my parents’ stories. Later, I realized that that these stories provided an easy entry into important aspects of the culture of Trinidad and Tobago. My familiarity with Marine Square and my easy understanding of, and connection with, Rudder’s calypso “Mastife,” in which he relates a story about infamous Port-of-Spain characters, comes from my father’s refusal to say Independence Square and his continued use of the term “Green Corner,” for example. But there was much more. There were stories about the reasons why Saldenah’s “Viva Zapata” failed to yield the expected returns to the bandleader despite its popularity, and about the destruction of Cito Velasquez’s Carnival band “Fruits and Flowers” during the clash between San Juan All Stars and Desperadoes during Carnival 1959, which was in turn recorded in Blakie’s calypso—Steelband Clash. These were stories that marked the years indelibly in my mind by helping me to associate events with dates.

And there were stories that led to a familiarity with sports clubs such as Colts, Harvard, Maple, and Shamrock, which were such a large part of the rich history of T&T—at least, the history of Port of Spain and environs. I learned about the influence of these clubs in defining the people who resided there and about the effects that rippled beyond Port-of-Spain to other parts of the country. Much of this influence, though not articulated, was played out personally in the lives of generation after generation in terms of the class and colour codes—privilege and deprivation.

My uncles also told stories of their childhood in Belmont, which they fondly termed “the village,” whenever they visited the old family home—my home. They spoke of the various types of mango trees and of the cherry trees, and they pinpointed the location of each of these in the yard. They spoke too of the land where they cut bamboo and stoned mangoes and played cricket and football, and of the camaraderie and friendships that existed. The same stories of the good old days were repeated, and it was always

interesting to hear them being told. We share what we have—and what we have are our stories. These children of the present generation were receptive to the stories. They thought of the past, our past, as exciting. This reaffirmed the value of oral history as a vital part of the informal education process—a veritable savings box for the future.

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