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Panmen of the old brigade at the reunion (from left): **STANDING:** George Goddard, a former president of the then National Steelbands' Association; Eugene Williams of Boys Town; Hugh Borde of Tripoli; Lloyd Loreihe of Invaders; Claude Monsegue of Boys Town; McDonald Kinsale of Red Army; Albert Jones of City Kids and a former president of the national association; Clifton "Block" Bonaparte of Southern Symphony, and Cyril Borde. **SEATED:** Ossie Campbell of Bar 20 and Casablanca, his wife Theresa; Hugo Besson of Five Graves To Cairo, and McKeller Sandiford of Bar 20. **INSET** is Carlton "Ziggeley" Barrow.



Here some of the old panmen get together with some younger ones at the reunion. **STANDING** (from left): Abdul Muhammad, Ronald Nurse, Hugh Borde, Beverly Griffith, Junior Pouchet, Keith Preddie, and Leon 'Smooth' Edwards. **SEATED:** John Babb, Tommy Crichtlow, Kendall Lewis and Claude Monsegue.

A GATHERING OF OLD-TIME PANMEN

*The battles over
and the hatreds
erased by time,
old enemies get
together to talk
about 'bad' old
steelband days*

By HORACE MONSEGUE

IN THE old days if they met it was war. Today, they have only memories of an era when to be a panman meant one had to be strong, courageous and "bad mind". Failing that, the ability to run very fast at the first hint of trouble was a paramount criteria in the code of survival in those early days of widespread gang warfare. Written in the unseen book of rules was not only a skillful pair of hands to beat the pan, but hands equally tuned to pelting bottles and wielding cutlasses.

The gathering of panmen from the 1950s and beyond took place last Thursday at the Belmont family home of well-known panman Hugh Borde, captain of the Trinidad Tripoli Steelband which is based in the United States. It was a happy bunch of steelbandmen who greeted each other, the old hatred erased by the passing of time. Some had not crossed paths in years, many still wear the "battle scars" and their tattoos which branded them as hailing from a particular steelband.

It was not so much that some of these pan beaters, now mature men, were born with a mean streak. But they were young at a time when society held nothing but contempt for those who "beat pan". The hostility of the panmen exploded in fights among themselves. Today they look back with unhappiness towards that period in the

history of the steelband.

In those days, men like Hugo Besson created their own "thunder" on the streets. Besson, 65, spoke to the SUNDAY GUARDIAN about his part in the stormy 1950s:

"We had to fight more than one element. On one side was the Police. On another side other panmen. And on the third side the public.

"Some guys' families didn't care about them...like my family and the public didn't care about us either. No man in that era should look for any self fame. Steelband is an African tribal thing and that is why we fought."

A Special Tattoo

Besson was the captain of the steelband Five Graves To Cairo, named after a popular war movie of the time.

"Everybody used to have a special tattoo on their wrists and that identified them as a member of the band," he recalled.

Besson himself answered to the alias "Tip Toe Kong", because of his unusual gait of bouncing on his heels as he stalked the panyards. Since the tender age of 12, Besson said he was beating pan and exchanging blows.

"You see," he offered, "African people have war in their blood and even the slightest thing

could cause fight."

He said the Bar 20 (the name for another steelband) panyard often turned into a battlefield. It is a price, he is confident, that earns him the right, along with other panmen of that era, to be respected by the present steelband authorities.

"I believe," said Besson, who still looks as strong as an ox, "all old time steelbandmen should be issued a permanent ticket to attend any steelband competition. I am saying this without fear."

Besson, who apparently retained his skills, is four months shy of retiring from National Fisheries where he works salting fish. He carves wooden items part-time.

Carlton Constantine Barrow turned up too for the re-union. He was better known as "Ziggeley".

"As long as you used to beat pan," said the 61-year-old Barrow, "you had to fight to defend yourself."

He explained that in the 1950s a bugle was an integral part of the steelband.

"All military bands had bugles in the movies. It gave men inspiration to fight and we fought, in fact the music was the basket of discontentment," he said.

Barrow said he never ended up in hospital or for that matter sent any of his foes to Casualty. That, however, didn't keep him out of the "stew", but he

managed to keep a few steps from the Police, not wanting at all to experience first hand what the Police could do.

In the turmoil of the 1950s and '60s entered McKeller "Big Mac" Sandiford. He told the SUNDAY GUARDIAN he was the first man to bring out a band after World War II. That steelband was known as Missing Ball, but the Police would have none of it and "Big Mac" found himself in jail on Carnival Sunday facing a charge of causing to congregate more than 20 persons in a public place. It was a distinct drawback for the pan movement because "Big Mac" was considered to be a fighting hero.

The Rough Days

However, he was one man who seemed to escape without any battle scars inflicted by pan gladiators. It seemed that he even got away from owing his very own alias, as so many panmen did in those rough days.

Clem Ballard managed to shake the badjohn stigma and it is to his credit that in 1952 he founded the Boys Town Steelband, the winner of the first ever Music Festival. It was the dawning of what seemed to be a new era of respectability for panmen in Trinidad and Tobago, but the final place in the sun would not come until many years.