

INTRODUCTION

The first train came into operation in Trinidad on the 31st August, 1876 and the last train went out of operation on 28th December, 1968.¹ The railways took over 70 years to expand in Trinidad starting with the cane tramways in 1839 and reaching its climax with the Siparia railway line in 1914. After 1914 the trains continued to operate for another 54 years until 1968, when their operations came to a halt. The last journey was made by a train that ran from San Juan to Port of Spain. This train was bought in 1915 from an English firm and consisted of a sturdy six-wheeler, which was used to draw three-88-passenger wooden coaches on the Arima to Port of Spain route.² Today the engine (no. 42) of this train stands as a monument in Port of Spain. (See photo no.1)

The following chorus in the calypso 'Last train to San Fernando' is significant because it evokes an element of nostalgia: the memory of the train making its final trip for the day.

Last train to San Fernando
 Last train to San Fernando
 And if you miss this one, you'll never get another one
 Last train to San Fernando.

Professor Gordon Rohlehr corroborated this view when he informed me that the said calypso was sung at the time in order "to alert commuters of the importance of boarding the train before it got crowded on its last trip to San Fernando for the day."³

¹ Trinidad Guardian, 5th January, 1969 p.1

² Ibid p.1

³ Interview with Professor Gordon Rohlehr, St. Augustine Trinidad, 4th December 2006

Mr. Rawle Gibbon also informed me that the calypso, 'Last train to San Fernando' was composed by Kenny St Bernard (known as the 'Mighty Dictator') in 1950.⁴ The last train which ran from Port of Spain to San Fernando made its final journey in the year 1962.⁵ The engine (no. 11) of this train also stands as a monument at Harris Promenade in San Fernando. (See photo no.2).

In 1960 I had the opportunity of traveling on a train from Rio Claro to Port of Spain with my mother and four of my siblings. I remember it took about six hours for this train to reach its destination, as it had to stop at every train station on its way to allow passengers to get off as well as to get on the train.

I also remember the train going through a dark tunnel on its journey to Port of Spain and the lights on the train came on. Today that Tunnel (which is known as the Knollys Tunnel) is still at Tabaquite as a reminder that a railway line ran through it (See photo no.3). This tunnel, however, was refurbished and reopened on 13th August, 1991 by the then Minister of the Environment and National Service, Mr. Lincoln Meyers as a tourist attraction (See photo no. 4).

I subsequently rode on a train in New York in 1987 and another in 1988 in Europe. What struck me about these trains was they were faster than the one I rode in Trinidad and they were more luxurious. In New York it took me less than half an hour to get from one state to another. In Europe I was traveling from one country to another, and I was able to overnight on the train, because there were beds and sleeping compartments on that train.

⁴ Interview with Rawle Gibbon, St. Augustine Trinidad, 13th December 2006

⁵ Trinidad Guardian, 29th August 1967, p. 11

My interest in researching this topic ‘the development of the railways in Trinidad from 1845 to 1947’ stems from the fact that I am interested and curious to find out why did the trains stopped functioning in Trinidad; while in other countries they are still operating and have progressed to a luxurious form of transportation, and remain the most efficient mode of mass transportation for overland commuters.

Michael Anthony states that it was the competition of motor cars and buses which were taking over as a popular form of transport for passengers that led to the abandonment of rail transport in Trinidad.⁶ The government of the day, however, contended that it was for economic reasons that brought the demise of the trains in Trinidad,⁷ whilst one writer further argued that it was because the railways were considered a part of the British colonial system that the then Prime Minister strove to destroy it at all costs.⁸ Whether it was for the former, latter or all of these reasons combined, I have decided to explore this topic with some caution.

Few authors/historians, however, have given any great details about the history of the railways in Trinidad. Louis A. De Verteuil has given a background on the general state of infrastructure in Trinidad after the island’s discovery by Columbus. Michael Anthony, however, has supplied some important dates in his writings on the expansion of the railways. Besides these two historians, a few authors/historians have merely made mention about it in their writings.

⁶ Michael Anthony, Glimpses of Trinidad and Tobago with a Glance at the West Indies (Columbus Publishers) 1974, p.46

⁷ George Montique, History of Rio Claro since 1900. Unpublished Thesis, p. 41

⁸ Eric Williams, 1958 Budget Speech cited by Alston A. Benjamin, Jerningham Junction in Trinidad and Tobago History: A Vital rail link. Caribbean Studies p. 14

I made references to these authors and some others; including an undergraduate Caribbean Studies thesis (dated 1995) on 'the establishment of the Trinidad Government Railway 1870 – 1945,' which necessitated valuable references to some primary sources. I also consulted correspondence from the Colonial Offices (C.O.), Council Papers (C.P.) and newspapers for most of the information on the topic.

This paper attempts to trace the development and operations of the railways in Trinidad from 1846 to 1947. The paper is divided into six chapters. Chapter One discusses a general overview of the Railway Age in the nineteenth century and what it meant to those countries that underwent railway development at the time. Chapter Two gives an insight into the general state of infrastructure in nineteenth century Trinidad and the factors that contributed to the birth of the tramways in the colony.

Chapter Three highlights the failed attempts of the private companies competing for the construction of a railway system in Trinidad. Chapter Four looks at the extension and development of the railway system by tracing the different phases of construction, which began in 1873 and ended in 1914 by the Trinidad Government. Chapter Five identifies some of the major issues which affected the Management and Maintenance of the railway system in Trinidad up to the year 1947. Chapter Six focuses on the impact which the railway had on the society during its years of operation in the island.

In addition to other salient points, the conclusion also notes that the idea of establishing a railway system is being mooted once again by the same governing party that abandoned the railways immediately after the colony achieved political independence.