



HOME IN ECCLESVILLE

Brinsley Samaroo

I grew up in the small village of Ecclesville which lies between Mayaro on Trinidad's south-east coast and the inland town of Rio Claro. Even today, some twenty years later, Ecclesville has changed little. It is one of those off-the-beaten track settlements that is so typical of our rural landscape—a few houses situated on either side of a main road.

Life in such a community, numbering no more than 300 people, was easy going and relaxed. There were few cars and much open space for playing games, catching birds or simply grazing goats in the late afternoon.

Most of the people who lived in Ecclesville were East Indians, the descendants of those who came from India many years ago. They worked on the cocoa plantations and the rice fields which adjoin the village. There were a school run by the Canadian Mission, two shops and a parlour which stocked sweets and soft drinks from San Fernando, biscuits from Port-of-Spain, and rock cakes and mauby that were village made.

No one in Ecclesville owned such modern inventions as a telephone or refrigerator. The owner of the only radio in the village had to put up with regular

calls from his neighbours who never stopped wondering at the miracle of hearing a voice speaking all the way from Port-of-Spain!

Port-of-Spain was a far off place with tall concrete buildings, cinemas, restaurants and well-dressed people. Newspapers, arriving a date late, related all that went on in this big city. The news was read by our teachers in school and we had to listen carefully since general knowledge questions and dictation tests were based on events in Port-of-Spain.

There was, however, a select group of villagers whose contact with Port-of-Spain was real. They actually went there! They were the vegetable gardeners who travelled by truck to the city every Friday to sell dasheen, eddoes, cush-cush, yams, bhagee and citrus fruit. They returned home with stories of car accidents, visits to gambling houses and to stores that sold wonderful things.

It was from the vegetable vendors that we learnt our first lessons in geography and we respected them for they could talk about places like San Pedro, Tabaquite, Brasso, Caparo, Caroni, St. Joseph and Laventille, all of which they passed on their way to sell their vegetables.

On evenings after school or work in the fields we went in search of birds, birds' eggs or whichever fruit was in season.

At week-ends, the big thing was to trap a monkey or an agouti. In the dry season we went "bale" fishing.

We had our own way of trapping a monkey and for this we used a calabash. We took a ripe calabash

fruit and using a penknife cut a circular hole at the top, about the size of a fifty-cent piece. The inside, or gut, of the calabash was then scooped out with an old kitchen knife or a broken spoon.

The hollow calabash was called a Boli and into this Boli we put a handful of corn or a few plums or cherries. The Boli was then taken to the forest to the "lastro" (underbrush) and fastened with wire to a branch or a tree root.

Here the excitement started.

We would conceal ourselves some distance away and imitate a young monkey crying for food. After about half an hour or so the gentle tripping of a band of monkeys would break the silence of the forest. A cough or giggle from one of us would send the band scampering away, so we had to be absolutely quiet.

Slowly the monkeys would approach the Boli, looking inquisitively around and into it. Without fail one monkey would step forward and put his hand into the Boli, grabbing a fistful of corn or plum as he did so.

But ah, when he tried to pull his hand out again, it was stuck fast. It never entered his head that the reason why he could not get his hand out was because it was folded over the corn. He does not understand that if he drops what he is holding he would be able to get his hand out again. So he tugs at the Boli, he screams and is in a panic! His friends of course scamper away and Mr. Monkey is left alone.

We then emerge from our hideout and secure the biting, squealing monkey. We break the Boli and Mr.

Monkey is taken home to be reared as a pet. If we already have monkeys at home and our mothers would allow no more, we let the new captive go free.

Equally exciting was baling for fish. In the dry season the countryside becomes parched. Leaves crack underfoot and soon the rivers stop flowing. When this happened groups of us would go into the forest to bale for fish.

We generally chose a river basin in which the water had not dried up too much. Then we built banks of wood and earth at each end and then emptied the water with buckets. This was a back breaking job, so we worked in relays. Depending on the size of the basin the job could take two to four hours, but at the end of it there before us were bucketsful of fish—*casadura*, sardines, *guabin*, river shrimp and conch.

Quite often there would be an alligator or two wallowing in the mud, or a water-boa (*houille*). Chasing these fearsome creatures away was a dangerous exercise but the presence of so many of us dulled the fear that one normally feels in such a situation.

At least chasing a *houille* away is far more adventurous than having to trek home for miles with a bucket or bag of fish. Worse than that was the thought that you would have to clean and season the fish—unless you had a kind sister who felt sorry for you.

East Indians live close to the land and derive most of their food from their immediate surroundings. Almost every bush or shrub can be used as medicine, as food, or in the preparation of some commodity.

In our village no one starved, even though no

one was wealthy. Breakfast usually consisted of one of a number of types of roti: dhallpuri, parata, sada or dosti. This was eaten with an egg and a chokha which is a mild chutney made of tomatoes, melongene or potato. Sometimes we ate roti with fried ochro, caraili or some type of bhagee.

But the best part of breakfast was when your mother sat or stood in front of her chulha (earthen fireside) turning out hot rotis for her hungry family. At week-ends this meal could last all morning. It was a real family occasion.

The luncheon meal was often heavier but was eaten quickly as everyone wanted to rush back to school. Lunch was rice, dhall (peas) and talcaree which is a vegetable or meat dish prepared in curry.

Dinner was a lighter meal consisting of dasheen, cassava or yam with a piece of salted fish and cups of hot chocolate or green tea. In homes where such a menu was too expensive the family did not suffer. You could always "borrow" a hand of bananas from a neighbour or could drop in around meal time. There always seemed to be enough.

Life in Ecclesville was free and adventurous and full of pleasure. This is why so many of us, even long after we have lived in town, never lose contact with our rural homes.