

Cunapo's Hidden Coal Mine

By Louis B Homer South Bureau

Nestled among the pristine forests on the Cunapo Southern Road there are two unique geological formations that have eluded many. They are the sites of a 19th century coal mine, and a sandstone boulder estimated to be 60 million years old. Both are in the vicinity of the 11 kilometre mile mark, on the Cunapo Southern Road that passes through dense forests from Coal Mine to Plum Mitán.

The 60-million-year-old boulder lying on the roadside is a "Gritty Sandstone Boulder" commonly called "the growing stone". Not far from the boulder is the site of coal deposits that have left its mark in time, and was responsible for naming this rural eastern district, Coal Mine.

The story of the mine has intrigued the villagers for years and now they would like the area to be classified as a main tourist attraction. "We have something to offer visitors but it must be in a form where they will benefit from the historical development of our village." said Ganesh Harripaul who has lived in Coal Mine all his life.

The mine has an interesting past. In 1904 a government geologist named E H Cunningham-Craig had conducted a geological survey in the area to determine the quality and quantity of coal deposits. The coal was needed at the time to fuel British merchant navy ships plying in the Caribbean. The investigation revealed that the coal was unsuitable for use as fuel because it contained too much water and some sulphur.

Curtis Archie, a consultant geologist, recalled the report prepared by Cunningham-Craig. The report referred to as Minute Paper 4896 stated "Investigations into the discovery of lignite, which is the second stage in the production of coal, proved unsuitable for bunkering." The report had identified the find in the forested area on the Cunapo Southern Road and called it "Cunapo Coal Field". The lignite had 11 per cent water with a fair amount of sulphur. Four samples of the formation were taken and all proved to be of poor quality coal.

Archie said a second survey was done in 1951 by H H Suter of Britain for the British Geological Department. Suter confirmed the findings of Cunningham-Craig, adding "the area had two fields of good lignite in two beds, found in the area at a depth of three and five feet, and the material

was unsuitable for fueling ships". The search for coal as a fuel was then abandoned.

In the meantime the village continued to be called Coal Mine Village in response to coal mining activities. Harripaul said his parents were living in the area during the investigations. "They were of the view that the men were looking for gold, but they found coals instead."

He said about one quarter of a mile from the road leading into the forest, there is a large cave that was developed by the geologists. "Is in the forest and as a child we use to play hide-and-seek near the cave and then we use to end up in Grosvenor Estate where there were plenty oranges and bananas..."

He said in those days the road was not paved. "Was gravel from Grande (Sangre Grande) to Biche. Now the road is paved and people using it as a highway."

Another villager, Popnee Maharaj, 95, said ever since she came to the village it was called Coal Mine.

"I came here from Plum Mitán when I was 12 years. My husband, Seuraj Mohan Maharaj, was from St James. We got married and came here to work on the cacao estate. "Since I know myself the village was called Coal Mine." Popnee said nearby Maharaj Hill was named after her husband. The Maharajs were the first East Indian family to move into the area. Popnee said, "It only had other people when we came, but they were always nice to us." Popnee had 11 children, one being Beecham Maharaj, a former chief magistrate.

Coal Mine in the early days consisted of a number of medium and large cacao estates. The largest being Monte Cristo Estate which was owned by Marlay and Company, a firm of Chinese nationals from Canton. They had arrived in 1924 and set themselves as wholesale and retail merchants. One of the employees of Marlay's was Marchack, who was the father of Sandra Marchack, Permanent Secretary to the Prime Minister. Another distinguished family of Coal Mine was the Supervilles. Joseph Superville, the eldest son, became Warden of St George, and later as the first Permanent Secretary to the Minister of Local Government, when in 1950 elected Members of Parliament were appointed as ministers.

The other geological gem, is the "Growing Stone" that has increased in height over the years, The stone has been visited by hundreds, and many

believe that "stone does grow". "From a geological perspective that is not so " said Archie The stone is on the side of the road overlooking parts of the virgin forests along the Cunapo Southern Road near the 11 kilometre mile mark. Geologists estimate that it is 60 million years old. It is about 15 feet high and covers an area of some 80 sq feet. Beneath the large boulder there are many smaller ones. Archie said they were weathered out of the Chaudiere formation of the Paleocene age. Forestry officials stated that "the formation forms the backbone of the hills around nearby Mount Harris. The clay and sandstone on which it rests is not suitable for agriculture."

The boulder originated from sands that were originally collected on an old seabed floor millions of years ago. Many are of the view that the stone gets taller each year. It was explained that the increase in height is due to the sinking sand around the boulder which automatically increases the height of the stone as the sand keeps on sinking.

Coal Mine has an even mixture of the two main races in Trinidad. Those of African descent went there to work on the cacao estates in the 1920s. The East Indian population moved into the area after they left the sugarcane estates. Most of them were small farmers and they started to plant lagoon rice in the lowlands of Coal Mine. Rice planting in the lagoon was something of the past. The swamp was graded, the water pushed into the Cunapo river and a number of residential, commercial and public buildings were erected.

With Government's current thrust on the development of tourism, the villagers would like Coal Mine to be put on the tourist map, as the only village in Trinidad where coal was found.