

ENVIRONMENT

The Cumaca Cave Tragedy of 1964 (Part 1)

IT SEEMS fitting in this March of 2014 that I hark back to an event with which both the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club and I were involved 50 years ago, on March 22, 1964.

I was a mere 25 years old, having been a member of the Club for about four years when on the calendar of activities there was planned a trip to the Cumaca Cave in Platanal, deep in the Northern Range. Here the largest colony of the "guacharos" or oil-birds, *Steatornis catrampensis*, were said to still exist in large numbers. The caves were accessible by footpaths through the numerous old cocoa estates that once belonged to the Leotaud family.

So on that fateful day, along with my younger brother Julius, in a convoy of cars carrying other members and friends of the Club, we drove slowly up the nine miles of torturous road into the Platanal Valley. Parking at the side of the road where a smaller dirt road led upwards into the hillside, it became apparent that the Club was not the only entity which had planned to go to the caves on that day.

Unloading their cars and vans were the members of the local branch of the British Sub-Aqua Club.

One of their members, Vincent Abraham, happened to be both a member of that association and our Club, and he explained that the happy circumstances that brought us together were totally unplanned. The Sub-Aqua Club had been diving on the site where the Spanish Admiral Appodaca had burnt and scuttled his ships at their anchorage off the island of Gasparee, before the invasion and taking of Trinidad by the British under Abercromby in 1797. The Sub-Aqua Club had decided to do



MEMBERS of the TTFNC and the British Sub-Aqua Group on the Cumaca Road on March 22, 1964. PHOTO BY IAN LAMBIE

some cave diving in the only cave that lent itself to this sort of underwater exploration, and to attempt to put to rest an old legend that there were other inner caves a short swim from the emergence of the Cumaca river in the depths of the cave.

The legends of these inner caves arose from a rumour that an ancient Amerindian had made the swim and came back to tell the tale, which was confirmed by a US soldier posted to Trinidad during World War II. He was said to have made the swim too, and in those days there were no sophisticated underwater gear at hand. Maybe he had a pair of swim goggles to make his swim, as the now familiar face masks and SCUBA-gear were certainly

not available at that time. But there was enough optimism arising from these stories and from the experience of the British, that there would be little trouble in either finding this fabled underwater cavern, or dispelling the myth forever. Maybe it was this optimism and devil-may-care attitude that was to result in the tragic events that unfolded later in the day.

After about an hour or so of walking, we arrived at the old estate buildings, a row of wooden shacks and quarters for the workers of the almost now defunct estate. As we prepared ourselves for the hike into the cave itself, we were given guidelines for our safety on entering the cave and what to expect, and "dos and

don'ts" concerning the use of flashlights that startle the oil-birds. The Sub-Aqua group had set off before us and was nowhere to be seen as we arrived at the entrance to the cave, a large angled fissure in a cliff face.

One by one we stepped into the shallow river and waded into the darkness of the cave. We could hear the unearthly screeches up in the darkness ahead and, as we got deeper and deeper into the cave, this devilish squawking became progressively louder as it grew darker and our flashlights had to light the way with every step. Overhead the birds were rushing about in the light-pierced darkness and a constant drizzle of bird urine and droppings began to



The Trinidad & Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

rain down. Added to that we were sure there were some bats too, as we could see their dark shapes fluttering about and above our heads.

On the banks of the river there were huge piles of bird and bat guano, accumulated over the years, and on this guano, black and smelly, were growing stunted forests of palm seedlings, all reaching upward like ghosts to a non-existent light. Without the light to begin the process of photosynthesis they would grow only until they had exhausted the supply of food in the seed and then they would die, or be eaten by the swarms of cockroaches, millipedes, and other cave arthropod fauna that scuttled away from our lights.

Having accomplished the first goal of our trip – to see these rare and curious birds – we set off to accomplish the second, which was to attempt to net the rare blind catfish which is found only in this cave. Though at one time thought to be a unique fish, and called *Cercorhamdia urichi* (after one of the founding members of the Club, but relegated to being only a variety of the common river catfish *Rhamdia quelen*), it was considered a prize catch for aquarists.

● TRAGEDY continues on Page 7B

ENVIRONMENT

Dangerous drive

● TRAGEDY from Page 4B

There are areas of the cave that only people who do not suffer from claustrophobia can attempt to pass further into the inner chambers.

One has to wade through almost chest-high water and hold one's head at right angles to the body to be able to breathe to pass under a low shelf of rock formation, before emerging into the larger chamber beyond.

As a number of us emerged into this last chamber we found the Sub-Aqua Club there and we were informed that a pair of divers, more experienced men from the British contingent, had already started their exploratory dive. The plan was to carry a roll of measuring tape in as far as they could swim for a half-life of the tanks of air, and then they would drop the roll and swim back, following the tape to the point of departure. We could see the tape disappearing into the dark water that flowed out from under the wall of the cave where there was an underwater passage that led downwards to who knew where.

But things did not look so promising as the water flowing out was murky with stirred up sediment.

A few minutes later the two men emerged from the hole and pulling off their masks they gasped in relief in the air.

Immediately they began to explain how dangerous they had found the going in, and even more so the coming back out where they stirred up wake, both from the action of their swimming and also from the trail of expelled air which, as they breathed, had disturbed perhaps years of the fine sediment from the surrounding rocks, walls and roof.

They were not so aware of this as they were going in, as they were swimming into the current, but when they turned to come back after dropping the roll of tape, they were faced with a wall of thick impene-

trable silt-laden water, with visibility at almost zero, making it difficult to see the tape much less the way out. They had managed to follow the tape in the murk and emerge only minutes before their air ran out.

They advised that due to the danger, the mission should be aborted until they had better equipment especially lights to see underwater. I saw that all they had were flashlights made waterproof by being wrapped in plastic bags, and there were no safety lines that they could attach to their bodies for retrieval in events as described by the first two divers.

But the local Trinidadian contingent began to protest that they had not come so far to give up so easily and so, against the advice of the more experienced divers, two local young men, Vincent Abraham and Adam Richards, prepared to make a second attempt, at least to get as far as the dropped tape for they could see that the water was clearing up as the silt was washed out and perhaps had begun to settle.

They began to gear up for the dive and Vincent came to my brother and asked if he could borrow the small jackknife he could see hanging on Julius' belt.

Julius readily lent him the knife and the slim leather belt and, as the two young men slipped into the water, he made a jest, imitating a famous Jerry Lewis diving posture, saying merrily "Good bye cruel world."

How prophetic those words proved to be.

Today's feature was written by Hans Boos. Part two of this account will appear next week.

For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org or visit our website at www.ttfnc.org.