

## COUNTRY LIFE

*By Valerie Crichlow*

Evening time was the hour for the two, big, thick, hot Johnny bakes. Nothing was more delicious. Mother could make any kind of bake: white flower bake, corn bake, cassava bake, and coconut bake. Mrs. Fields cooked in the open air on a stand in the back yard, just next to the foul run. She pricked the entire surface of the thick round smooth dough with a fork. She then placed it carefully into a large round warm iron pot. This pot stood on a coal-pot containing hot, smoldering coals. Then a wide aluminum sheet was placed over the bake. Atop this sheet was a blazing fire of wood and coals. Most often, it was Mother who tended the fire. Sometimes, it was done by Linda, her grown-up niece, who lived with us at Chacaban. They would stand arms akimbo before the fire, sometimes fanning, and at other times, poking at the red flames. They would sing happy, gospel songs as they worked. As a child, Jerri would look on fascinated. She witnessed this scene so often, she was sure that she could do it herself.

"Oh boy! I can't wait to taste that crust," cried Jem.

He and Jerri often had fun at these times. In the hot, grey ash at the base of the coal-pot, they roasted cashew nuts, corn grains, eddoes, potatoes, and anything else that took their fancy. They were very careful that the blistering hot coal-pot didn't burn their prying fingers. At last, the bakes, swollen and golden were done.

At supper-time it was bake with vegetables, or something savoury like saltfish, or smoked herring. Steaming hot cups of cocoa or chocolate would complete the meal.

"Time for tea," called Mother.

The children looked ravenous. They slid along the bench, and leaned anxiously towards the long kitchen table. Mother cut one of the big bakes, and steam rose out of it.

"Hope you washed your hands," she murmured, passing heaping plates before them.

The aroma was a wonderful blend of coconut bake, and saltfish choka. They said grace quickly, and broke through the delicious crust to the hot, flaky insides.

"Mmmmmmmmm," was all that could be heard from the children, with cheeks bulging, and eyes half-closed. Jem was enjoying his favourite pastime...eating.

Jem loved food. He just loved to eat. Apart from riding and fixing his old bike, food was the greatest thing. Mother said that as a baby, he was big, hefty and had a hearty appetite. As a growing boy, he was also big, almost fat. At mealtime, he never seemed to get enough to eat. He always needed the lion's share to be satisfied.

"When I grow up," he often said, "I will buy so much food, all the food that I want..."

Such was his passion for eating. Mother gave him access to the kitchen, to prepare little dainties that he loved. He prepared sugar-cakes, corn-cakes, salted-nuts, popcorn, and other goodies that took his fancy.

Julius Fields had a hearty appetite too. Perhaps where eating was concerned, Jem was a chip off the old block. Mr. Fields worked hard for his family. During the week, he went to work as usual in the capital city. On weekends, after they had moved to Longentown, he relaxed in his garden, tending his food-crops. He planted corn, peas, ochroes and cassava. There were also bananas, plantain, and moko trees with young suckers too, as well as yams, dasheen and eddoes.

Father also had another garden miles away in Brothersville. His father, old Mr. Fields owned several acres of farming land there. Julius Fields cultivated his own little plot with yams and citrus. When it was time for harvesting, he and Jem would journey by train to this garden. They would leave before daybreak, spend the day reaping the crops, and pass the night at a hut erected on the land. They would return home by the midday train on the following day laden with food. To Jem, such times were great adventure. Jerri would listen in rapt attention as he told of how he caught birds and insects, chased animals and killed snakes.

The urge to plant ran deep in Father's veins. Jerri especially loved reaping time. Father's crops were always so healthy looking.

"These hands were blessed by my father," he often boasted to his children.

Jerri loved seeing Father reap "hills" of cassava. She liked the digging, pulling and tugging, until at last, the emergence of the long, swollen roots covered with earth. Mother peeled and boiled them. When cooked, they were white, dry and very delicious. Jerri gorged herself with them at mealtime.

Food crops were not the only items farmed by Father. He wanted his children to share his experience of pig farming. So, Janet and Jimmy, two squealing piglets, were installed in the Fields's backyard, where Father built stys for them. He bought them from a friend in the neighbourhood. Jem and Jerri adored their pink hairy little bodies and petted and played with them whenever they could. Father fed them a special diet bought specially for them. They also fed on odds and ends obtained from Mother's kitchen, like rice water, and the skins of vegetables and ground provisions. Jem and Jerri also fed them watergrass. The children roamed the bushes collecting that special delicacy, just to tickle the pigs's snouts, and have them reach for the grasses and consume them greedily. The children found this great fun.

"Janet, Jimmy..." Jem would call, approaching the sty.

"Umph...umph," the piglets replied in unison.

They always responded to their names, and the children boasted to their friends of the animals'

intelligence.

The piglets grew rapidly. When they were full-grown, Father made plans for them. He sold Jimmy to a butcher in the village, and fetched a good price for him. Father was pleased, but the children were sorry to bid goodbye to their friend. Janet was alone now, sensible and greedy as ever. She grew bigger and fatter. The children enjoyed bathing her with hose and brush, till her coat was glistening pink. It was fun caring for Janet.

One day, Father made an announcement. Now that Janet was full-grown, he had to slaughter her to provide meat for the Christmas season. She was reared for that very purpose.

"Oh my poor, poor Janet," wailed Jerri.

The children were sad. Father tried to console them in his kindly way.

"We all enjoyed her, but I bought her so that one day, she could provide food for our table...she is only an animal..."

The children understood, but couldn't help feeling sad for the unhappy fate that awaited their friend. They resigned themselves to their impending loss.

Jem and Jerri were still very attentive to Janet. They would call her and she would still respond to her name. She would raise herself up on her hind-legs, lean her fore-legs against the sty, and probe their hands with her snout. As Christmas-time approached, and the time for her slaughter drew near, Jem and Jerri felt better about everything. Father sharpened his knife well. Everyone looked on as he skillfully performed the task. No one shed a tear. That Christmas, they all had a good time, enjoying the delicious meals that Janet had made possible.

The house at Chacaban occupied by the Fields was not supplied with pipe-borne water. Therefore, the family had to fetch water by hand from private premises nearby. The main water-carriers in the home were Jem and Jerri. Jem carried his bucket-full, swinging it dexterously from arm to arm. Jerri often balanced her bucket-full on her head. On reaching home, the buckets were emptied into a large drum in the kitchen kept specially for this purpose. Father kept a few more drums outside at strategic points to collect rain-water that poured off the roof when it rained. Thus the Fields were always well supplied with water for domestic use.

When the family moved to Longentown, the situation was a similar one. Water had to be fetched a short distance away, at the main-road standpipe. This water supply was used by many villagers around. Only the wealthy folks could afford a private line to their homes. Father often carried two containers attached to either end of a rod slung across his neck and shoulders. Then, with Father's help, Jem, growing bigger and stronger, put together a large box-cart with four sturdy wheels. In this was placed a large covered drum.

"Now, fetching water will be real fun," Jem declared.

"Climb in Jerri!"

In she climbed, and away they moved down the graveled street. Jem pushed the handles, while his sister enjoyed the ride to the standpipe.

"Gosh Jem, yuh getting real strong." Jerri felt proud of her brother.

Their fun didn't last too long though. Sometime after Jerri's eleventh birthday, she began to have misgivings about those jaunts to the standpipe. Boyish traits like riding in water carts, pitching marbles, and climbing trees had to cease. Yet, she would still ride Father's bicycle "one hand," to run errands at the Chinese shop for Mother. Much to her brother's dismay, Jerri was changing. She was growing up.

Julius Fields sometimes did his own coal burning. This habit was born out of his rural upbringing. Coal was essential for cooking purposes, and those who knew how to produce their own did so instead of buying this commodity. He tried to involve his family in this activity. Jerri loved to watch as Father prepared the coal pit. He dug it days before the event. With fork and spade, he made a wide, round, shallow hole, just about three feet deep. Then he prepared the wood. He used wood like orange wood, guava wood and any other kind of solid wood that he could find. The more solid the wood, the better the quality of the coals produced. Coal-burners who lived near the forest, had the advantage of obtaining solid wood like Mora. Father had to be content with what he got.

The wood was cut into lengths, and laid carefully into the pit. Earth was poured lightly over and between the logs. The fire was lit from the bottom of the pit, and it then spread upwards. Before retiring for the night, Father checked to make sure that all was well. The logs would burn throughout the night and well into the next day. Father would awake from sleep during the night to ascertain the pit's progress. "Pit burst" was a popular expression of what could happen if the pit was not monitored every few hours. To check it, Father removed the earth from the surface, and poked around with a long rod. Coals already made were taken out, and the rest would be covered over again lightly with earth. In the morning, this procedure was followed again. The burning continued for hours again. Eventually, around midday, all of the wood was turned. Father took out the coals, and wet the pit thoroughly to put the fire out. He was pleased with his job, for he had provided coals for his family's needs.

Jerri was very proud of her father's talents. As far as she was concerned, he could do everything. He was a product of the country, and country-life was great.