

## SCHOOLDAYS

*By Valerie Crichlow*

Travelling by train was great adventure for Jerri, even though she and Jem did it each day to get to school in Chacaban. Waiting at the small depot in Longentown, she could hear it coming from far away off. The horn would blow loud and long alerting everyone to its presence. She liked to see it racing round the bend towards them. So many times, it seemed unstoppable, until, almost suddenly, it would cruise to a halt. To Jerri, the driver seemed like a clever mysterious figure alone and unafraid to steer that massive iron vehicle along.

Ascending the stairs to the carriage was always good for the leg muscles.

"Let's sit by this window here," Jerri encouraged her brother.

The carriage always seemed dark on entering. Once they got inside, it became brighter. They settled into padded bench-seats, that were sturdy, and perhaps comfortable. There were generally about three carriages occupied mainly by school-children. With a piercing blow of its horn, the passenger train would move off down the lines.

"Tickets, tickets..." The conductor stumbled by to collect the fare. Jem and Jerri generally had season tickets, which they displayed confidently. Some people would purchase the small, grey, one-way tickets for a mere eight cents.

The scenery outside rushed by the open windows, as the train sped along on its way to the next stop. The morning air was clean and fresh. Jerri looked wistfully out at the thick bushes, trees, little wooden houses and cattle grazing in the fields.

"Nuts, channa," came the familiar voice of the corpulent channa-man with his big basket and old felt hat, making his rounds. His gold teeth sparkled between smiling lips, as he distributed his goods to eager customers. His basket was crammed neatly with dozens of cute, brown conical packages of delicacies.

"Penny a pack..." he encouraged. Slung around his waist, was a large pouch where he stored his earnings. Slowly, he moved past. A strong familiar scent reminded her that they were passing a pig farm. Jem and Jerri often chatted as they went along.

"What you say?" one of them shouted to the other. It was sometimes difficult to be heard above the din of the engine. Occasionally, they saw a barking dog, a farmer bent over his crops, children walking to school, a flight of birds, and white fluffy clouds sailing by.

After that ten-minute journey, the train pulled into Cuthbert Junction. This was a major station with many lines crisscrossing, running to and fro. Three trains were parked, while another was just entering the station.

"Look Jerri, look our train coming, come on!"

The children headed out of their train, book-bags in hand. They moved along the platform and through the crowd to the other side of the station. At this time of the day, the station was always swarming with school-children. Under the awnings of this large wooden building sat many vendors with large wooden trays. They sold mangoes, oranges, plums, cherries, chenets, sapodillas, and any other fruits that were in season. They displayed large bottles of sweets, nuts, chewing-gum and other delicacies. The vendors were generally plump women, wearing hats, and sitting for most of the time. The children entered a carriage which was already full.

"I hope we get seats," cried Jerri.

They didn't. There was only standing room left. In a few minutes, the train sped off. Jem and Jerri held on as best they could. The carriage rocked from side to side. The scenery here was mainly of bushes and trees, some of which brushed the tops of the carriages as they went past. As they neared Chacaban Railway Station, the train crossed the busy roadway with traffic waiting on both sides. On reaching their destination, the children alighted and hurried off to school.

Trains were a great way to travel. They were safe and sure. They were also an important means of transportation for the sugar industry. Tons of canes, burnt and cut, were transported by rail in numerous carriages from field to factory. These had their own special lines on which to run. It was a common practice among some school-boys, to pull canes from passing carriages. They would then break the canes into pieces, and feast on the delicious sticky juice. The dangers of this habit held enough fascination to entice them to repeat this feat again and again. At Chacaban Government School, children were often warned about this danger.

One day during the lunch break, many children were seen hurriedly leaving school, and running up the road. Soon word got around the school that an accident had occurred involving a school-boy and a cane carriage. Jem was among those who went to investigate. When they returned to school later, he and a few other boys were crowded by Jerri and a group of her friends, curious to know what had transpired. Jem was silent. The boy involved in the accident, sat right next to him in class.

"Is true that Donny Saith fall under the train?" one girl asked.

"Yeah..." they all responded.

One boy continued: "When I reach there, they'd carried him to hospital already. He and some other boys was pulling canes from some carriages that was passing. Ah doh know what happen, but like a cane get stuck, an wasn't coming out when Donny pull it...the canes an dem throw him down on the lines, and the iron wheels crush he legs flat like a bake. Everything happen fas fas...oh Lawd, yuh shudda see blood everywhere, an the boys that was with him screaming an screaming like dey gone mad. Somebody went for de police, an police bring ambulance...dey carry Donny to hospital. Ah hear Donny turn white white an looking like if he dead..."

The girls stared at him in horror. Poor Donny... he was not a bad boy...what would become of

him now? Would he die? But Donny did not die. He lost both his legs, and had to be content with life in a wheelchair. He was lucky to be alive anyway.

After school on afternoons, Jem and Jerri walked the two miles to their home in Longentown. On a few occasions, they had to walk to school on mornings too when Mother had no money to give to them for the train journey. But the children did not mind. On those mornings, they left home earlier than usual, tucking their lunches safely away in their school-bags. It was exhilarating going along so early. The morning air was fresh and clean, and less people were about. On these occasions, they would arrive at school early, and their day would be off to a good start.

On their trek home on afternoons, they were part of a throng of other children, who did the same. As they lived at Longentown, they had the longest journey of all. They walked along the streets of Chacaban, talking, laughing, and sometimes staring in at the showcases of stores displaying their fancy goods.

"Good afternoon Mr. Brown..." many of them saluted the popular druggist, as they passed his store.

Further along, some would stop to purchase goodies from the pholouri vendor near the grocery store. During the mango season, they had fun raiding trees along the route. Some boys threw stones, and picked mangoes for everyone. They relished the fleshy delicious fruit, whether green or ripe.

On other occasions, the treat was sugar-cane.

"Yeah, leh we go an ask the man," was the general opinion within the group.

Jem and Jerri hesitated, but eventually followed the others to the cane-fields not too far off. Here, there was much activity. There were large animal carts and truck-wagons being loaded with canes. The canes were cut, weighed, loaded, and transported by road and rail to the factories. The men in charge were generous, and never grudged passing a few lengths of canes to the children.

"Thanks Mister, this cane look sweet," someone shouted.

Sometimes, the more adventurous of the group ventured into fields unnoticed, and broke unburnt canes themselves. The canes were then peeled with strong eager teeth. The sweet sticky juice was relished at a leisurely pace.

"Boy, dat cane taste sweet..." They all agreed, wiping sticky mouths with the backs of their hands.

Jem and Jerri were alone for the last leg of their journey home. They walked up and down hill. They moved from main road to short cut. They crossed the train lines at the depot, and in a few minutes, were racing down the incline to their home. Mother greeted them with a kiss, and the promise of something nice to eat.

When Jem passed on from Primary to Secondary school, Jerri travelled alone. Jem no longer used the train, but the school-bus. He had to go past the train depot, to the top of the hill to the Bus Stop. The bus usually passed at seven-thirty. It came from many miles away, through villages like

Liberville, Lumsden, Chiquito, Bocaro and others. It always arrived full of school-children and Jem hardly ever got a seat. The bus was old, and laboured up and down hill.

Jem could hear it coming from way off. He could see it only after it had rounded the bend to approach the stop uphill where he waited. There was a great spirit of camaraderie among these young passengers, and Jem made many new friends there. Jerri missed her brother on the road. She was forced to get used to his passing her in that noisy vehicle, on her way home. Some day, when she was older, she would join him on the bus.