

**EDWARD SEAGA: MY LIFE AND LEADERSHIP
VOLUME 1: CLASH OF IDEOLOGIES 1930-1980**

Living the Jamaican experience

Today, we continue a special series of excerpts from the autobiography of former Prime Minister Edward Seaga with the kind permission of Macmillan Publishers. Mr Seaga's autobiography will be officially launched on Wednesday, March 3, at the Mona Visitors' Lodge at the University of the West Indies campus, starting at 6 p.m.

FAMED MEDIUM Eileen Garrett invited me to accompany her team on a brief visit to Haiti to make contact with voodoo scholars. While there, she offered me a grant of £90 from the Parapsychology Foundation to do a study on Jamaican spirit cults. I accepted, knowing that by selecting a community with a native spiritual church, as well as all the other features required for the study on child development, it would be possible to collect the material for both studies concurrently.

In February 1953 I set out to locate such a community. I was lucky to find one quickly. It was Buxton Town, a picturesque village of some 300 residents nestled in a foothill on the edge of a sugar estate and large orange grove. It was 25 miles from Kingston.

I took up residence in the village, in a cute little house that had just been built. Being a resident meant I could participate in all community affairs: school, religion, entertainment. I could also make after-dinner casual visits to various homes, or pass some time at the village

shop to talk informally, mostly about events of the past, current affairs, village gossip and folk lore. I found these sessions very informative in a way not likely to have been achieved by the usual format of visiting and interviewing during the day.

'WHITE' MAN

Acceptance of my presence as a welcomed resident took a month. My racial background, although mixed, was categorised as 'white', in Jamaican circumstances. It was, and to a lesser extent is still, rare for anyone considered 'white' to live in a community comprised entirely of residents of African descent except for a Chinese grocer, a field manager on the sugar estate of Indian descent, and a white family who owned a large citrus grove and lived at the foot of the hill, but not in the village. The family was one of the McConnell clan, known to me from Montego Bay where we had been neighbours.

My father had decided to put at

National Library of Jamaica

my disposal a small black Vauxhall car which I parked at my cottage. Good though the intention was, it became a serious embarrassment. First, I noticed children backing away from me, or dodging, as I approached. Obviously there was a fear factor in play. After a few days I raised the matter with the teacher in whose home I had made arrangements to take my meals. Her prompt response at first puzzled, then troubled me: "They say you must be a black-heart man,"



FILE PHOTOS

Then prime minister Edward Seaga, led by the Rev Antonette Dreckette of the United Holy Church, 'tramping' around the thanks-giving table at the Jamaica House Garden Theatre during the start of a three-night revival ceremony which was part of Heritage Week.

she confided with a giggle. "What is a black-heart man?" I asked in all innocence, revealing at the same time the core of the problem of different cultures that would lie at the root of the study on which I had embarked. "A black-heart man is one who drives a little black car and goes around handing out

sweets to little children so he can catch them and cut out their hearts to make medicine," was the chilling explanation. I realized that I was only one step away from the possibility of some child with a fertile imagination living out the fantasy by accusing me of attempted abduction. The situation called for caution and a new strategy. I immersed myself more fully in the life of the community, visited and worked alongside farmers in the fields, washed and dressed the sore feet of children. I used my car to take a

teacher and four children to a school outing and to convey a boy who had fallen from a coconut tree to the hospital. These acts of friendship were well appreciated. On the basis of my belief that if you treat people nicely they will treat you nicely too, everything soon settled down.

I had been given an excellent first-hand example of the gap, indeed the gulf, that separated my cultural background from that of the villagers. I obviously was as ignorant of their folk lore as they were of my cultural background. Bit by bit, I learnt from the people about their folk life, for which no existing textbook could have prepared me. I was now a student in a different kind of university - that of life. I eagerly accepted my role, anxious as I was to learn.

My relationship with the resi-

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SEAGA

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dents grew as I probed the beliefs and customs surrounding every stage of development of the child from the prenatal period to school-leaving at 15 years of age. After nine months, my stay ended with a farewell function given by the residents in my honour. The interviews below, conducted in 1980 with residents of Buxton Town and published in the **Daily Gleaner** on October 28, 1980, record the views of many with whom I worked in my research 27 years earlier.

"This young man that lately come to live in the district," wrote Adina Willis of Buxton Town, St Catherine, to a relative in the United States in 1953, "is like a son to me now. He asks us plenty questions and write down our answers in a book. We do not know why, but he is kind."

Twenty-seven years later, Deacon Hines of Buxton Town Baptist Church, one of the three churches in the district where the young Edward Seaga worshipped, says: "We came to the conclusion that he was interested in seeing how poor country people lived. He wanted to experience our way of life for himself, to live like us, work like us, eat like us, worship like us. So that there was no difference between us and him."

ROADBANKS CHANGES

The road to Buxton Town winds uphill a few miles away from Linstead Square and three miles from Bog Walk, curving through orange groves and cane fields until the colour of the earth on the road-banks changes from dark grey to red. The broad acres dwindle to small plots, and the roof-tops of the houses below are barely seen.

It is said that it rains here every Sunday afternoon. Not only rains, but lightning flashes, and thunder rolls and yaps at the limestone



Minister of Finance and Planning Edward Seaga (stopping in foreground) leads a group of residents of Tivoli Gardens in a 'plant out' in the community in 1969.

rocks as Deacon Hines in his pulpit bows his head in prayer 'Amen', and Preacher McKay at the Pentecostal Church knocks her tambourine and leads a chorus: "On the royal telephone." Later the congregation emerges to stand in the mist about the churchyard or in the little side road beside Preacher McKay's basic school, the school that Edward Seaga built there. They talk of many things, but as October 30 approaches, they talk mostly about him.

"I was picking gungo peas in the field one day when I saw this stranger man coming up the hill," recalls Mrs Pearl Taylor who was a young girl.

"I dropped the pan and started to run for I just see this man appear up like a ghost. But he called to me, and told me don't be afraid. He introduced himself to me and the next girl and told us he had rented a house in the district and was going to live here with us. We did-

n't know what to make of him at first and plenty people were doubtful."

Within 24 hours the news of the stranger in their midst had reached most of the town's 300 citizens. Mr Oscar Ferguson said his daughter told him about Edward Seaga when he came home from his field that night and how the young man had given her sweets.

"I decide to make myself known to him for we used to hear all sorta story about Blackheart man. But then we hear that Mrs James, the post mistress, was cooking for him and that he was a student. The first ting he say to me was that he want to come to the field wid me to work. And every morning he would come with us ... we plant yam, potato, pine, all kina ground provision. We cook in the field and he eat wid us. Then when we done,

we sing and play conch shell and he would blow mouth organ, and if him hear us say any little ting like 'first-time saying' or proverb, and such, he would stop and write it down in his notebook. We never have a thought that one day Mass Eddie would ever interested to go into politics for him never bring it to us. He was just jocular."

As Mr Ferguson talks, an old woman nearby shakes her head and smiles, staring sightlessly into the distance. This is Epsie Henry who Buxton Town people say was Edward Seaga's special charge. They never tire of telling how he used to cook her food with his own hands, making the fire, peeling and boiling the green bananas, often providing the 'salt ting' himself. And how he cared for the children, bringing them toys to choose from, books to read, dressing their sores, and helping the poorer ones with food and clothing.

"He was not here more than few months before everybody get to love him. There was not a yard in the district that him never go to. And no care how de road bad – could be in the deepest woodland – Mass Eddie go there. If we sick, him find car carry we go doctor. Dat is why when we hear him enter politics we know him was going to do good, for we see the character in him from him was young," said Leonard Johnson.

"Mother Dyne from the revival church get to love him so much dat she used to fret how him walk the road in the night-time and have to cross the two graves that was at him door-mouth. So she give him a vial to sprinkle the yard wid and to make X on him forehead as protection against spirit. I believe her blessing still follow him today. She also cautioned him never to throw water outside his room after six in the evening without saying 'Excuse me'." The mist drifts and

the sky lightens, yet the people linger.

"Why they give him so much bad name?" blind Miss Epsie wants to know.

LOVELY SEND-OFF

"Mass Eddie live one year mongst us and when he was leaving, people from Spring Valley, Mexico, Wakefield Savannah ... Everybody come ... all his family from Kingston, and give him a lovely send-off, everybody cry."

As Buxton Town people were later to discover, the year Edward Seaga lived among them was spent collecting data for his thesis on the lifestyle of our country folk, their faith-healing methods and religious belief, a study that was to equip him with a deep knowledge of the Jamaican personality and ultimately lead to his becoming the most controversial figure in present day Jamaican politics.

He entered politics in 1959 with his slogan 'the haves and the have nots' championing the cause of the poor and the dispossessed and there have been those who, since then, have watched his career with unease. Not the least reason for his being so controversial is the fact that he does not fit into the mould of the traditional Jamaican politician. He talks little and works hard. He is the only Jamaican politician to have transformed a slum into a model community. His substantial contribution to the economic, social and cultural life of the country is acknowledged by all, and above everything else, his personal integrity is unquestioned. For 21

years, his political enemies have sought to assassinate his character with accusations of his coldness, ruthlessness ... lack of care for people, but listen to Mr Noel Dixon.

"Mass Eddie never leave out Buxton Town since 1953.

Sometimes every weekend him come back till after him married, him invite we to the wedding, then afterwards him and Miss Mitzie and then the children come here Sunday daytime and spend day with me. When him turn minister of development, him give de district Delco, build the community centre, train plenty young people from here to do things, bring in sewing machine, stove, ball grung, fix up the place nice. Nearly every week we used to have function at the Centre and Mass Eddie used to come. One thing we fret for now is that wid all the violence them might try harm him."

The end of my stay in Buxton Town marked the beginning of the next phase, which focused on the indigenous spiritual religions. There are many such groups, located in particular parishes. The best-known and most widely encountered spiritual groups are the revival churches or 'bands'.

■ *Don't miss Part 4 of this special serialisation in next week's Sunday Gleaner. Also, part two of Laura Tanna's extensive interview with Mr Seaga will continue on Sunday, March 7.*