

My Plantation Mentality

By Jackie Pias Carlin

Black snow fell in the early twentieth century too, and when it happened, we closed our windows tight and waited for it to end. When it was over, the ash that mixed with the dirt became fine dust that settled on our window sills and furniture causing such chaos to my breathing that I became allergic to housework. When I left Pai'a, I abandoned the black snow (sugarcane ash), dust, and noise of harvesting, and the smell....it was like breathing rotten eggs every time we passed the Pai'a Mill. It was a joke that living in Upper Pai'a was better than living in Lower Pai'a because of that sulfuric odor.

The same olfactory experience happened as we drove along Hansen Road. The road snaked beside an irrigation ditch which carried that same putrid water from a Pu'unene holding pond that smelled like bad farts.

But we didn't complain (out loud) because it was these discomforts that came with our shared plantation life. Our plantation mentality—we never complained, and we let things go. We were raised to be kind, respectful, quiet-spoken, and obedient.

Our parents belonged to the plantation, but some saw that there were opportunities elsewhere and moved. However, not once did I hear that they left because of the black snow.

On a higher level, the plantation gave us a unique history and diverse culture. Let's not forget what's been created and shared.

Our ancestors from foreign continents created a system of communication when they first arrived to work in the cane fields. They learned each other's words and mixed them into a useful language, Pidgin. In my generation, we couldn't speak our parents' native tongues outside of the home. We spoke Standard English every time we left our camps and went into the classrooms. But on the playground, our Pidgin tongues were in control. It still works today. "Try try."

We were there as prejudice diminished between ethnicities. Our grandparents frowned upon multi-cultural relationships. They didn't dare to cross the road between each other's ethnic camps, but gradually they did. In our days, more mixed marriages happened. With these mixes came the many beautiful skin hues of Hawai'i today...the rainbow children.

Our foods are worldly. Hawai'i Regional Cuisine originated from our parents who sat in the cane fields sharing lunches from their kau kau tins, or assembled at the pineapple cannery's wooden lunch tables eating from bowls covered with wax paper and held together with rubber bands in brown paper sacks. Our parents swapped recipes and brought them home—Spanish Bacalao, Filipino Adobo, Italian Spaghetti, saimin better known as Japanese Ramen, hekka or Japanese Sukiyaki, Hawaiian Laulau, sweetbread or Portuguese Pao Duce, chop suey or Chinese chopped vegetables. Today, after eating in a Pacific haute cuisine restaurant, I recall the tastes of our parents.

We are distinct from others when we say that our families worked in the sugarcane fields; the sugar mills, and in the pineapple canneries/fields. We also survived after our homes and our neighborhoods were demolished to make room for more sugar production, then highways, then shopping centers.

The waving cane fields will disappear, but this era cannot be forgotten. We created Pidgin—now an official language, beautiful multi-ethnic families, and our famous cuisine. Remind our children and our neighbors where we come from, and what it was like to live then, whether good or bad. We inherited a unique history. We are the sugarcane era. Be proud.