

Lopinot: French in name but Hispanic in culture

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Imagine waking up to lush green mountains, speckled with flaming poui and immortelle trees. Imagine enjoying fresh clean air every day while watching a flock of green parrots flying overhead, in and out of the thin white layer of mist covering the hilltops. Imagine no more - discover the village of Lopinot!

This little village, nestled in a valley in the Northern Range, lies about ten kilometres north of Arouca and can be accessed by a meandering road providing amazing views of the beautiful surrounding landscape. This year, the people of Lopinot are celebrating two hundred (200) years since the village they call home was founded by the Frenchman, for whom it was named. In addition to being one of Trinidad's natural treasures, the village is also one of the few in the country with a strong Hispanic past that prides itself on actively maintaining aspects of that culture.

The history of present-day Lopinot dates back to 1800, when a Knight of the Royal and Military Order of St. Louis, Colonel of the Legion of Calvador and Lieutenant General of the French Army, Charles Joseph Compte Loppinot de la Fresilliere arrived in Port of Spain from Jamaica. With only his wife, children and some loyal slaves, the Count was determined to forget the devastating loss of all his possessions in slave rebellions on the island of St. Domingue, better known today as Haiti, where he had fought with British troops against Toussaint L'Ouverture. As a compensation for the loss of his estates there, he was supposed to be granted a parcel of land in Trinidad.

However, this did not occur and he had to borrow money to purchase part of the Orange Grove Estate in Tacarigua. According to J.D. Elder, in his book 'Lopinot: A Historical Account', "He had come a great distance and had had a turbulent war record but once these were past he quickly settled down on part of the Orange Grove Estate in Tacarigua which he bought from Edward Barry on reportedly liberal terms". After a short successful stint in sugar-cane cultivation on that estate, the Count was forced to seek alternative means of livelihood due to the declining sugar industry.

In search of a better life, the Count set off to explore the valleys of the Northern Range. Following the course of the Rio de Arouca, which is now known as the Lopinot River, he finally came upon a clearing of grassland in a valley that he called 'La Reconnaissance'. Shortly after this discovery, the Count received news from Governor Hislop that the British Crown had finally approved a land grant for him. The Count was free to choose where he wanted to establish his new estate and his obvious choice was the area he had named 'La Reconnaissance'. He was now part of the plantocracy and aristocracy in Trinidad and Tobago.

In 1806, the Count once again moved with his family and loyal slaves, this time to 'La Reconnaissance', to establish a cocoa plantation on his land of some four hundred and seventy-eight (478) acres, laid out in the shape of a French General. He quickly built a tapia plantation house, slave quarters, a jailhouse, and cocoa-drying houses. Today, upon a visit to the Lopinot Historical Complex, one can view two of these cocoa-drying houses, with its retractable roof and all, which enabled the roof to slide out to dry the cocoa beans on sunny days and to slide back inside in times of rain. Likewise, the structure that currently houses the on site museum is all that remains of the Count's 'Great House' which was erected some two hundred (200) years ago.

Though there is little record of what actually transpired on the estate, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the Count was successful in his cocoa cultivation and on a smaller scale, his coffee cultivation. As Archibald S. Chauharjasingh explains in his book 'Lopinot in History', "The success of 'La Reconnaissance' must have spread about with much rapidity, for within a few years several new estates were established in the surrounding areas [...] By 1820, there were four other estates in the valley. They were 'San José', 'La Pastora', 'El Repaso' and 'El Guamal'."

In addition to managing his plantation, the Count was also a member of the Trinidad militia and was appointed its Brigadier-General in 1806. In 1816, the Governor at the time, Sir Ralph Woodford, made him a member of the Council of Government, and he remained a member until his death in 1819.

There are some common legends shared by residents of Lopinot amongst themselves and with visitors to Lopinot. It is said that the Count's ghost visits the 'Count Lopinot House' from time to time, especially on stormy nights, riding on a white horse. In fact, there is a photo hanging in the House today which shows a shadow of the Count, and which gives credibility to the legend told to visitors, by the manager Martin Gomez. Another legend makes reference to a cashew tree on the Lopinot Historical Complex that was supposedly where the Count hung rebellious slaves. Villagers still refer to it as 'the hanging tree', although the original tree died and a new one was planted in the same spot.

After the Count's death, the entire valley underwent several major changes, including the change in ownership of the Count's plantation, the establishment of the large La Pastora and San José Estates, and the arrival of East Indian immigrants in 1845, following the abolition of slavery.

However, the most significant of these changes was the migration of people from the village of Caura one hundred years later, in 1945. Due to a shortage of suitable drinking water in the country, the Government decided to construct a dam, using the abundant supply of water available from the Caura River. As a result, the entire valley needed to be relocated and the Government bought most of 'La Reconnaissance' to distribute to some of the displaced Caura villagers.

It was this group of people that introduced the Hispanic culture to the village, as all of them were of Spanish descent since most of their ancestors came to Trinidad from Venezuela. They were descendants from the old 'peons', people mixed with Spanish, Amerindian and African, who came primarily as cocoa workers and as such, introduced cocoa here. They were also all Roman Catholic, and as such, took their religion very seriously. When the time came to build a church in the village, the people themselves carried the statue of the patron saint of Caura, Saint Veronica, the bell, stained glass windows and several other items that they salvaged from their now demolished church in Caura, to Lopinot. They also gathered stones from a nearby quarry to construct the rest of the church, which now stands beautifully in Lopinot, La Veronica RC.

So, although the Caura Dam was never constructed, its proposed construction led to the relocation of the 'cocoa panyols' of Caura and has contributed to the rich history of Lopinot. Furthermore, though there is no historical evidence to suggest when the name of the valley was changed from 'La Reconnaissance' to Lopinot, Lopinot is known today to be a melting pot of diverse cultures, predominantly composed of Hispanic descendants.

For more information about the Spanish As the First Foreign Language (SAFFL) initiative, please contact the Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish (A Division of the Ministry of Trade and Industry) at 624-8329 / 627 – 9513 or fax us at 623-0365.