

Nostalgic recollections of Godfrey Chin as recalled by Trev Sue-A-Quan

Back in the early 1960s when Guyana's national hockey team was on top of their game among the Caribbean nations a novel youth training camp was started for all of those who wanted to improve their skills at the game. At the time I was the hockey goalkeeper for Queen's College, a position I acquired more by default than deliberate choice since nobody else was eager to take on the role of last defender – the one person to be assigned the blame when a goal was scored by the opposing team. The hockey camp was held at the Chinese Sports Club (later renamed Cosmos) and held on Sunday mornings and there were drills on attacking, defending, passing, tactics and more. As the national goalkeeper Godfrey was of course my mentor and his nimbleness and enthusiasm were infectious. One instance that stands out was when he shifted to his right to block a shot from that direction but the shooter directed his shot to Godfrey's left. In a flash, while leaning to the right, he thrust his left foot backwards and neatly deflected the ball with his heel. That impressed me immensely because the "normal" way of trying to stop the ball was to stand squarely to the shooter and present the pads as an impenetrable wall. But Godfrey was no normal athlete. He demonstrated that any action that did the job was to be utilized. As a youth half a dozen years younger than my mentor I did not leave a great impression on Godfrey and the only national honours that I can claim was when a national youth squad was put together to challenge a visiting team from Britain. In fact it was a team scrounged from the sailors on a warship that was in town for security duty and many of the players had little idea how hockey was played, or that only one side of the hockey stick should be used to touch the ball. The Guyana Youth Team did win the game but nothing compared to the accolades that Godfrey and his team members achieved for elevating Guyana's hockey skills to leadership status in the Caribbean region. However, I do have to credit Godfrey for the training he provided because the skills I acquired led me to become the 1st XI hockey goalkeeper for the University of Birmingham in 1965.

Many years later Godfrey and I each headed to North America, he to Orlando, Florida and I to Vancouver, Canada. After the publication of my book *Cane Reapers* in 1999 Godfrey came to the fore as one of my enthusiastic promoters and he greatly appreciated the knowledge gained from my description of the arrival and experiences of our Chinese ancestors in Guyana. He began to submit articles about his recollections of Guyana in the past, in witty and down-to-earth style. He emailed me asking how I went about publishing a book because he was giving thought to putting together a book based on his emerging articles. I suggested that he should not try to prepare a narrative in a logical time-based sequence but rather jot down each account or activity as a separate item. Later he could then stitch them together into a complete story. He also questioned me about printing and marketing and sought my input about layout, costs, print run numbers, promotion and the like. GODc, as he then termed himself, did not disclose his full concept for his book to me but he garnered enough to launch his *Nostalgias*. It was like a breath of fresh air from the Atlantic coming across the Sea Wall. The amazing and detailed recollections that were resident in his brain were startling to say the least and the title of the book was a perfect representation of what he had to say.

GODc decided that the best way to promote his book was to do a book tour and he included Vancouver as one of his talking spots. I invited him to be my guest and he was adamant in insisting that I not open out the folding sofa-bed and that he preferred to sleep on the cushions of the sofa which would be less hassle. He brought a large collection of photographs for which he needed to get a mounting board. He knew exactly what he wanted and after a few phone calls I located a sign maker that supplied the required large-sized sheets. He also considered buying a projector for his presentation but I advised that it might blow his limited budget and, through some Guyanese connections, I was able to rent one at a very reasonable price. He then explained that he wanted to utilize a song by Dave Martins that would “remember your boyhood days.” I wasn’t familiar with this particular Dave Martins creation and so we sat around the kitchen table listening to the CD and transcribing the words into a karaoke-style slide display. After these preparations were done GODc found the time to indulge in his recreational activity – playing Scrabble online with others worldwide. Yes, Godfrey was a man of many words . . . and worlds.

There were two events held in Vancouver for GODc. One was at the home of Desiree (Young) Cheevers where friends and past colleagues of GODc gathered informally. There were of course many gasps and hugs as GODc recalled past encounters with attendees, especially the females. His display of photos impressed the gathering as much as his amazing recall of events of the past. The second gathering was organised by the local Guyanese Association and held in a church hall. It was there that GODc unpacked his suitcase filled with streamers, bunting and balloons as well as an electric air pump for inflating the balloons. It amazed me that the man was so thoroughly prepared, bringing such stuff across the continent. He overrode my reluctance and insisted that we display a video of his salsa dance as well as a video of an Elvis routine that I had performed on a cruise to Alaska . . . all in the way of nostalgia and entertainment. I led the song to recall boyhood days, much to the appreciation of the audience who indeed recalled the events that Dave Martins had recorded. But GODc was the man of the moment and he did not disappoint. He deemed his visit to Vancouver a success even though the sale of his books covered a portion of his travel costs. But this is what he had anticipated and he was thankful that his message went over well – that the days of old in Guyana were worth recalling not only for nostalgic reasons but also for history. That night we posted photos of his Vancouver visit to folks on his email list. GODc left several copies of his book with me as “local agent” and they were quickly purchased by enthusiastic believers.

For entertainment and relaxation, Godfrey asked if there was a place to dance salsa. My wife and I went with him to the appropriate night spot that offered lessons followed by a session of salsa dancing. He was in his element and was showing some moves that would impress the instructor. He explained that he was in fact a salsa teacher in Orlando and had taken part in various hip-flexing events that got him recognized among the salsa activists. He later sent us a DVD describing the fine points in dancing salsa.

On a visit to Florida in February 2008 my family deliberately set course for Orlando where Godfrey was our guide for the day. He drove us around in his minivan, which in itself was an interesting experience because he almost ploughed into a crossing pedestrian, interrupted only by my sudden exclamation, and it was apparent that his eyesight was

failing, if not practically gone. (This was also evident to recipients of his emails who would be faced with a display of large-sized bold fonts.) He was a practical host who showed us the good and bad sides of Orlando while completing his errands, although he declined to accompany us to Disney Village that night – it was merely Mickey Mouse to him.

Over the years I have been honoured to be among his “consultants” when GODc needed clarification of some incidents – perhaps the riots of 1962 or the streets where we lived or the opening of a cinema or store. But my input was merely in the way of clarification or confirmation of what was in Godfrey’s encyclopaedic memory. Towards the end of 2011 he needed to know how to arrange materials such that he could easily sort them by date or place or individual name. I suggested that he needed to learn new tricks by utilizing a spreadsheet program. He replied that he would try it out but I didn’t hear back from him, not even to ask, “Ya think it easy?” And now it has come as an immense shock to learn that GODc has left us when he had so much more to tell. We can only be grateful for what he had to say in his collection of nostalgic memories that defines the life of Guyanese in a bygone era.