

# TEA MEETING

*Eulalie Rivera*

*The "Tea Meeting," a combination of variety show and church social, is usually held during the Christmas holiday season. It consists of a series of verbal performances introduced by a Chairman to a King, Queen and Princess, who preside in appropriate costume. At the event, speeches are pompous, often ridiculous and replete with outlandish diction and flamboyant ornamentation.*

*The Tea Meeting was introduced to St. Croix from Barbados. It probably developed out of fundraising church events. The name derives from an attempt by Methodists to substitute tea-drinking occasions for those in which alcoholic beverages predominated.*

*Older Crucians can still declaim parts of tea meeting speeches but because the organization of the event is very elaborate and time consuming, it is rarely celebrated today. Eulalie Rivera, educator and chronicler of Crucian traditions, recalls the tea meeting:*

About the year 1934-35, I attended a Tea Meeting at the Auditorium of Diamond School. This is what I remember about the procedure of that Tea Meeting — a pattern similar to the one followed in all traditional tea meetings, including the ones still held today.

First of all, there were not many cars on the island, so most of the people came on foot or by horse and cart. The Tea Meeting began at about 6:00 p.m.

The Characters:

A Chairman

A King and Queen, representing British Royalty

A Philosopher

A Mathematician

A Socialist

A Physiologist

A Cook

A Bartender

The Meeting opened with the Chairman's announcement of readiness. Then everyone sang "God Bless Our Native Land."

The Chairman then saluted the King and Queen.

A Choir sang.

Then the Chairman called on whoever was at the top of the program, and this is the way it went:

"Mr. Physiologist, will you address us?"

"Master Chairman, I'm coming. I'm coming. Master Chairman, I'm coming." He starts walking from the back of the room. When he gets up to the front, he says:

"Master Chairman, I am coming as a human being. Master Chairman, I'm here to tell you tonight of our human body. Master Chairman, our human body is made up of flesh, blood, water and bones.

"Master Chairman, the human body has over 200 bones. Master Chairman, our two hands has over 50 bones."

He then names the bones of the body, the muscles and composition of the blood.

The Choir then sings a song or two, and the Chairman again salutes the King and Queen.

He then calls on the Mathematician, who proceeds from the back of the room onto the stage, with a square, a rule, and a protractor in his hand. As he approaches the stage, he chants:

"Mr. Chairman, I'm coming. I am coming, Mr. Chairman. I'm coming like the days of the week which we know now to be seven."

Reaching the stage, he continues:

"Mr. Chairman, it was not always so, as I will explain in my address.

"Mr. Chairman, as the ocean moves in currents of seven, so I'm coming in seven more steps. Mr. Chairman, I've come as the ocean current moves — in six small waves and one big one to make it seven."

He salutes the King and Queen, then turns to the audience:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I begin my lesson with the unit of things. I'll talk about abstract things. I'll talk about concrete things. I'll talk about symbols.

"Gentlemen and Ladies, I'll show these ten fingers, I also have ten toes. Ladies and Gentlemen, the number ten then represents the base of all mathematical procedure. Ladies and Gentlemen, the art of expressing numbers by symbols is called notation, and the art of expressing them in words is called numeration."

He would then go on to lecture for quite a while.

The Chairman next calls for Mr. Philosopher, who also approaches from the back of the room, saying:

"I'm coming, Master Chairman. I'm coming as the Philosopher who said, 'Wise men learn more from fools than fools learn from wise men.' Yes, Mr. Chairman, I

am here to show you some wisdom from the Philosophers."

In this way Tea Meeting would progress until about midnight, with many speeches on a variety of subjects, interspersed with songs by the Choir.

At the midnight intermission everyone was served tea and a sandwich, usually homemade bread or johnny cake with a slice of ham — real, home-cured pork which the members cooked a day or two before Tea Meeting.

As the meeting came to an end, a specially costumed group of dancers would perform an exhibition dance called "Lancers."

The Tea Meeting was over after everyone had joined in singing the hymn, "God Be With You Till We Meet Again." But there was often a band of the kind that's called a "scratch band" today, but was known then as a "fungi band," and it would strike up a popular dance tune and everyone who had been at the Tea Meeting would troop up the road, sometimes to Grove or to Bethlehem.

Tea Meeting was an event usually held about twice a year. It was an occasion in which the whole community participated and it was the highlight of our social year.

*For each load of coal, a worker for the West India Coal Company received a brass tally worth two cents. (Courtesy the Fort Christian Museum, St. Thomas)*



## COAL CARRIERS

*Arona Peterson*

*Arona Peterson is a well-known St. Thomas author, newspaper columnist and chronicler of island culture. She has written about island stories, proverbs and traditional foods and herb uses.*

*The following poem and notes are excerpts from her most recent book, Food and Folklore of the Virgin Islands.*

Faces so blackened  
Only White of eyes clear  
Flour bag shirts and pants  
Once bright colored dresses now  
Faded after many washings  
Tally bags filled with tallies  
Swinging and swaying  
With movement of hips  
Making sweet music.

Not a troupe of Zulus  
Out of merriment  
But men and women  
On their way home  
Sweaty, bone weary  
After a day of carrying  
Hundred pound baskets  
Of coal on their heads  
Heavy baskets unloaded  
They talk and laugh  
In tune with jingling tallies  
In pockets and tally bags  
Making sweet music.

A familiar scene in bygone days — Coal carriers. By no means the best or easiest way to earn a living, but between a rock and hard place and children to feed, no choice.

The men and women who made the choice may not have been on any rung of the social ladder but they were not incumbents either. They gave much more than they received but with satisfaction that every penny (or tally)

was justly earned.

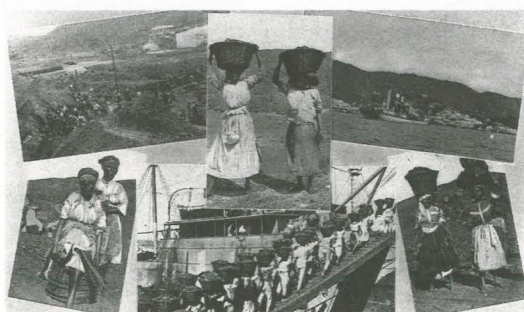
No two ways about it, that was hard rough work, but whatever the people that carried those baskets were made of, is not used for making people anymore, at least not in these parts.

Spines and connecting links of necks are made of plastic, buckle under slightest pressure in these days, the days of the joggers with nothing on their heads.

For all the hard work bodies were kept in good shape, even with the load off their heads they walked as if they were carrying the heavy baskets, heads held high, chests way up, backs straight as a pin. Whatever they did, they must have been doing it right, for they seldom needed doctor's care. They drank maubi [ale-like drink] by the gallons to keep the lungs clear, and took frequent bush [herb] baths to keep the pores open so they could perspire freely.

When dressed for church, weddings, funerals or any dressing up occasion there was much lace and embroidery under those dresses as any other lady from a different walk in life.

The language was strong but reserved for the dock, seldom ever on the street and never on Sunday. Even if provoked they'd say if today wasn't Sunday I'd give the length of my tongue but wait till I ketch you tomorrow.



*In the early 20th century, Virgin Islands coal carriers load coal aboard a visiting ship anchored at the harbor when St. Thomas was one of the busiest ports in the Caribbean. A collage of photographs from the souvenir pamphlet St. Thomas and the Virgin Islands, U.S.A., compiled and published by the St. Thomas Bureau of Information, 1919. (Photo courtesy the Von Scholten Collection, Enid Baa Public Library and Archives, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands)*