

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.

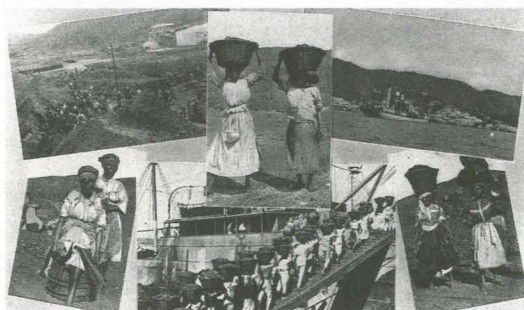
No two ways about it, that was hard rough work, but whatever the people that carried those baskets were made of, is not used for making people anymore, at least not in these parts.

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)