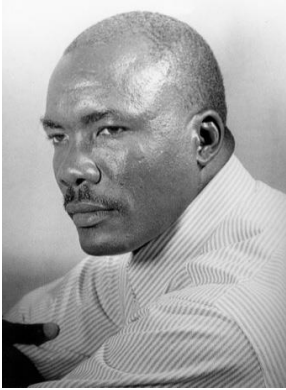


The Making of Shantytown

by

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History waits for no Project

As with any city, town, village or community, Shantytown began with one house, when, in 1980, a couple whose house Hurricane Allen had destroyed built a shack on the flats of the Shantytown area. However, before this pioneer home, before there was a Shantytown, there was the 1979 general elections that swept the St. Lucia Labor Party (SLP) into power after a fifteen-year drought, and that ushered in Mr. Bruce Williams as the district representative (SLP) of Vieux Fort.

Affectionately known as Daddy Bruce on account of his generosity and his habit of forever bearing treats of candy and Shirley biscuits for children, it was no surprise that one of Mr. Williams' first initiative as District Rep was a housing scheme for the Shantytown area. In fact, the scheme had gone as far as dividing the land into residential lots. In this bold new initiative Mr. Williams wasn't without help. For around this time, Salas, the Venezuelan Construction Company, was establishing a business base in Vieux Fort, and as a show of goodwill the company had fenced Friendship Park and equipped it with spectator stands. Also, lower down Friendship Park the company had built a sports dressing room that turned into a gym, a sports conference room that became an entertainment center called the *The Vént*, and camping houses that later served as the Lion's Preschool. But more importantly, Salas had already set aside twenty or more prefab houses for Mr. Williams' housing project.

Unfortunately for would be Shantytown residents, history waits for no project. Six months after the 1979 general elections the labor party government got embroiled in a power struggle that eventually led to the dissolution of the government. At the premature general elections held May 3, 1982, the John Compton led United Workers Party (UWP) returned to power by winning fourteen of seventeen seats.

With the return of the UWP to power, Mr. Williams's housing scheme was shelved, or rather discarded. Instead, the government set aside the area for hotel development. And would be Shantytown residents never saw the Venezuelan prefab houses. The houses were used for the construction and extension of schools in Vieux Fort and other districts.

Before Shantytown there was the Mange

The UWP high plans for the Shantytown area soon fell into trouble because before Shantytown there was the Mange. The Mange, that is the part that was inhabited by people, was the area bordering New Dock Lane in the South, St. Paul's Lane in the North, Clarke Street in the West, and New Dock Road in the East. But actually the whole area east of Clarke Street, between Moule-a-Chique, the Vieux Fort-Castries Highway and *an ba koko* (coconut grove fronting the Atlantic) was considered the Mange. Historically, the Mange along with the Bacadere has been the most depressed part of Vieux Fort. Congestion, prostitution, alcohol and drug abuse, school dropout, obscenity, children and spousal abuse were rampant.

In fact, one of the few positives about the Mange was that it had produced some of the island's best footballers, cricketers, athletes, and musicians.

However the disposition of a people, they grow. After all, the good Book Itself said, *be fruitful and multiply*. So while the politicians were out-talking each other and developing plans and counter plans for Vieux Fort and the Mange, the congestion, overcrowding, in brief the population pressure in the Mange was brewing. The better-off Vieux Fort and Mange residents found relief in places like La Tourney, La Ressource, Black Bay, Morne Beauséjour and St. Jude's. But the poorest of the poor were trapped in one or two-bedroom shacks that were so over crowded that the homes literally spilled onto the mud side walks. So what was amazing wasn't that the Mange had spilled over to form Shantytown, but that the Mange had taken so long to do so.

Maybe what had precluded many from seeing the Shantytown area as a place for human habitation was that as long as people could remember it was a place where Mange people emptied their chamber pots and bowels and a place where they raised hogs. Furthermore, the area was covered with a tangle of bush that provided a heaven for *jan gaje*, Rastafarians growing their herb, and for couples in search of isolation. The concept of Shantytown as a place of human habitation was so farfetched in the minds of Vieux Fortians that when the first homestead arrived in Shantytown, many couldn't believe that someone had had the audacity and indecency to move out there. So much so that some thought that the homestead wasn't a home at all but a pig sty. When people found out that indeed it was someone's home, they kept asking the woman of the house if she wasn't afraid to live in all this bush alone. The woman, who was originally from Debreuil but whose spouse was a Vieux Fortian, used to answer that she is clean enough to entice people to move in. The woman still lives in Shantytown, so does some of her children and her grand and great grandchildren.

Population pressure in the Mange was the underlying factor that led to Shantytown, but the trigger was Hurricane Allen. The hurricane forced residents of the Mange out of their comfort zones because it caused damage to just about every house. The Mange became unsettled. People were displaced. Many were forced into a building and rebuilding mode. Some had no choice but to be on the move. Once in this creative frame of mind, all what was needed was for a pioneer to open the eyes of Mange residents into seeing that the Shantytown area was fair game for human habitation. And what probably gave this Shantytown pioneer the idea of moving to Shantytown was Mr. Williams' well publicized housing scheme the year before.

The second house, shack rather, to come to Shantytown was built right at the entrance of Shantytown, next to New Dock Road, on top of where a garbage dump used to be, and to a lesser extent still was. Compared with the first shack, which was back in the bush away from passersby's eyes, this second house was in full view of the public. Clearly, this was an affront to the UWP government who had already set aside the area for touristic development. Understandably, the UWP District Rep and chairman of NDC, the government's public land-use watch dog, were outraged. So it was no surprise when the government sent a bulldozer to demolish the shacks and to send a clear message to the Mange and beyond that the area was destined for higher causes.

This was without a doubt a defining moment in the history of Shantytown, in the history of the Mange, in the history of Vieux Fort. One could well imagine Vieux Fortians sighing, "its happening again, history is repeating itself." For, ironically, although Vieux Fort have had the largest expanse of usable land of any district, the history of Vieux Fortians is the history of landlessness. In fact, it appeared that Vieux Fort's abundance of flat land had been more of a curse than a blessing to the majority of its residents.

The History of Vieux Fort is one of Landlessness

Vieux Fort's large expanse of flat land had made it ideally suited for sugarcane cultivation. So much so that Vieux Fort was home to the first sugar plantation (1764) in St. Lucia, and up to 1767 the then called quarter of Vieux Fort accounted for half of the island's sugar acreage. All this was great for the plantation owners but bad for the slaves. The absence of mountains in the Vieux Fort area made it difficult for the slaves to run away to freedom, and since most of the plains of Vieux Fort was suitable for sugar cultivation, there was little of the so called marginal lands for the slaves to grow their own food. Therefore, the slaves in Vieux Fort were more heavily dependent on the plantations for their survival than were slaves in other parts of the island.

Slavery was abolished in 1838, but the dependency and landlessness remained because there still wasn't any land (marginal or otherwise) to be had. After all, the plantations, who owned most of the lands, did survive slavery. And even when in 1937 the Vieux Fort sugar factory closed, rendering seven thousand people jobless and leaving the sugar lands idle, the people remained landless because they could not afford to purchase the land, and they couldn't cultivate it for it still belonged to the owners of the defunct sugar factory.

Without buyers, the colonial government was left with little choice but to purchase the land from the sugar factory. However, once the land was in government hands, given the thousands of people the factory had put out of work, many were no doubt hopeful that the government would parcel out the land to the ex-sugar workers as part of a settlement scheme.

But history doesn't always follow logic. The settlement of the sugar workers on the land that they had toiled most of their lives for and for which their forebears had been enslaved was not to be. Instead, the government of St. Lucia invited the Barbadian Government into establishing a Barbadian land settlement scheme. Facing an overcrowding problem at home, Barbados welcomed the offer and established the Barbados Settlement Company (in 1938) as the vehicle by which the land settlement scheme would be carried out. Besides the sugar factory, the company purchased 2500 acres of land in the Vieux Fort area. Three-quarters of which was set aside for Barbadian settlers, each of whom would receive lots on which to grow mostly sugarcane and to a lesser extent food crops. These settlers would live in fifty-two, two-room, company-built cottages at Beauséjour.

But what was to become of the 7000 unemployed St. Lucians? They would remain landless, off course, but may be not idle, for they could obtain employment at the sugar factory and they could work as laborers on the remaining 600 acres of land the company had set aside to cultivate its own sugar. By 1940, the settlement scheme was in full swing. There were already 600 Barbadian settlers.

History makes no promises. In the late 1930's Hitler's Germany began invading and conquering its neighbors. Having its own designs on the Pacific islands, natural resource-poor Japan entered the war on the side of Hitler and drew a reluctant America into the war when it bombed American Ships at Pearl Harbor. World War II shifted into high gear.

Vieux Fort's geography once again determined its history. Due to the district's large expanse of flat land lying right next to the coast, the Americans leased from the British all of 3031 acres of the plains of Vieux Fort for a Military Base. The American Base subsumed the sugar lands so the Barbadian Settlement Company was dissolved, and the settlement scheme aborted. With the Americans, any hope of displaced Vieux Fortians owning their own land grew more distant, because the Americans occupied the plains of

Vieux Fort even more extensively than the sugar estates ever did.

But how did the coming of the Americans affect the Mange and hence the making of Shantytown four decades later? Well, up to the time of the Americans no one was living in the Mange or the Bacadere. Rather, both the Mange and the Bacadere were two large uninhabited mangrove swamps. So essentially, Vieux Fort, that is the part inhabited by humans, was sandwiched between these two great swamps. Up to 1941, the town could boast of only about 300 homes and no more than 2000 people.

Even so, most of these inhabited lands were owned not by individuals but by institutions. Up until the 1970s the greater part of the land west of Henry Avenue and Hospital Street that stretches from the Vieux Fort Square to the waterfront was owned by the Roman Catholic Church. The area roughly where the square now sits and across Clarke Street where Boriel's housing project lies was owned by (and was home to) the Vieux Fort Central Sugar Factory. East of the sugar factory, the area bounded by St. Paul's Lane, New Dock Road, Clarke Street and Louisville was owned by the Anglican Church. Right to today, most of the people living around the Anglican Church do not own the land their houses are on. The squatters (as I am sure the church is calling them) are supposed to be paying the church \$47 in annual rent. Understandably, since most of the current residents represent the second or third generation of people on the land, the rents are not forthcoming. A few years ago in preparing to sell some of the land the church had sent eviction notices. But the catch was that the benefactor who had made the church a gift of the land had stipulated in her will that the land must forever remain in the church's possession. So the church's attempt to sell the land reached only as far as the registry. And being members of the Anglican Church, if not in practice at least in name, and being privy to this information, the people simply ignored the eviction notices and so have remain landless in name but not in use.

When the Americans came, they met a community of sugar laborers at Pointe de Sable, the area roughly where Club Med now sits. These people probably had settled there because of proximity to the cane fields. Since the Americans needed Pointe de Sable, they relocated some of the people to Derrière Morne and the rest to the Mange. Most of the people who relocated to the Mange were Indians, so the settlement was unofficially called Collietown. Today the Indians have disappeared, not because they moved out, but because by intermarrying with blacks their descendants have become indistinguishable from the black population. More changes came to the Mange when, to build New Dock Road and also a colony of *kai planes*, camouflage plane hangars, the Americans land-filled most of the Mange east of Collietown. Also, to allow excess water to flow out of the Mange, they built a drain stretching across the Mange to the Atlantic. After the Americans left the insides of the *kai planes* were used as pig pens and their tops provided children latitude to fly kites. In the eighties the *kai planes* were leveled off to make way for a sporting complex still in the making.

The Americans influenced settlements in Vieux Fort in other ways. The construction of the military base and auxiliary facilities, created an unprecedented level of employment and high wages. Accordingly, people flocked to Vieux Fort from all over the island and beyond, creating a housing shortage. With the housing shortage, more people moved to the Mange, and, not to be ignored, the Bacadere.

Since the Mange and Bacadere settlers never did buy the land their homes were on, nor did they receive titles to the land, most of them are legally landless. In fact, some have been landless ever since slave catchers snatched their ancestors from their African villages.

The Showdown

This was why the confrontation between the tractor of the UWP government and the shacks was a defining moment in the history of Vieux Fort. Would history prevail? Would Vieux Fortains again be displaced, relocated, dislocated in the name of higher causes? Remain landless when their district had the greatest abundance of usable land of all districts.

For once history was defeated. Vieux Fortains, those from the Mange and outside, raised their voices in protest. They put their bodies between the tractor and the shacks from which Shantytown would derive its name. The tractors backed out. Vieux Fortains had won one.

Encouraged by this victory, the shacks multiplied. Now, they weren't anything pretty to look at. On the contrary, they were a sore in the eye. They were built from galvanized sheets that Hurricane Allen had blown off people's houses and strewn across the land, scavenged and stolen lumber from construction sites, stolen or discarded pallets from the dock, damaged plywood gotten cheaply from hardware stores. Built not by expert hands, but by *koudmen*, by any willing hand that could hold a hammer or a spade. No matter. History is unmindful of beauty.

Watching the Mange race to give birth to the ugliness called Shantytown, which was making a mockery of its hotel plans, the UWP government no doubt felt compelled to try once again to erase Shantytown from the face of the land if not from memory. Six months after the first encounter they sent another tractor. By now, instead of two shacks there was a colony of shacks. There was more at stake than the first time around, so understandably the people protested even more vehemently than the first time. Nonetheless, the tractor did manage to demolish fences and the foundations of shacks in the making. Beyond that it went no further. Not so much because of the people's protest, but because the operator had a sister who had a shack in Shantytown. He refused to bring down completed houses. He was fired, but his sister still lives in Shantytown.

After this latest conflict, a few concrete houses moved to Shantytown. Now this was the real test, for concrete houses suggest permanency. The government met this new challenge, not by brute force, but by law. The perpetrators were taken to court. However, the final judgement of the court was inconclusive. The houses remained.

Shantytown in Full Bloom

It seems that this was the sign that some would be Shantytown dwellers were waiting for. Those, for example, who wanted to build something better than a shack, but were unwilling to spend that kind of money only to have a bulldozer turn their homes into uselessness. Shortly after the court case, better houses started coming to Shantytown, and people not just from the Mange and the Bacadere, but as far as Castries were moving in. Soon the bottom part of Shantytown started filling and the houses began climbing up the dock hill that rises to become Moule-a-Chique.

In the Mid 1990s Shantytown got another shot in the arm. Vieux Fort fishermen started finding cocaine on the ocean. In one instance they reportedly found 400 kilos of cocaine. The fishermen accustomed to the sea sharing its bounty with them asked no question of the sea when it coughed up the cocaine, no more questions than when it was tuna the sea had decided to offer. Neither did Shantytown. Because no sooner had the fishermen arrived on shore with their catches, Shantytown blossomed and multiplied even more

rapidly and the shacks started giving way to proper houses, concrete ones even. The bottom of Shantytown, south of the Shantytown main road, got filled. Homes rapidly climbed the dock hill threatening to become neighbors to the affluent homes on Moule-a-Chique.

Yet Shantytown had no running water, no electricity, and the huge, mud ditch into which all waste water east of Clarke Street drained and into which the Atlantic out flowed, was still there breeding mosquitos. In fact, Shantytown's only source of water was the public laundry that predated it and which had been built for the benefit of Mange residents. In the late eighties Shantytown got a little relief when the sports club, "Wadat Possie," as part of club week activities, ran pipes from the laundry and established a couple of stand pipes.

In 1996 history intervened, but this time on the side of Shantytown. General elections was drawing near, and miraculously, in the fifteenth year of Shantytown's existence, WASCO brought in water to homes and UCELEC electricity. Shantytown quickly become a city on a hill. From a distance Shantytown became the most picturesque sight in and around Vieux Fort. When one enters Vieux Fort from the air, Shantytown is what first catches the eye. And one of the best views of Vieux Fort and its surroundings is obtained from the top of Shantytown. Off course, that said nothing of the mosquito ditch and the garbage filth, and that the predominance of guns in Shantytown had made the police wary of entering the area.

More help was underway. The Dr. Kenny Anthony led Labor Party made history when it swept into power in 1997 with a sixteen to one majority. Soon concrete footpaths and drains, and new (paved) roads opened the Mange and made it almost unrecognizable. The Bacadere too got its share of drains and concrete pathways. According to some residents, the Bacadere has become a place one need not be ashamed to call home. "A city by itself," someone has described the place that four decades ago was an uninhabited swamp.

In this construction spree, Shantytown wasn't forgotten. The government constructed a four-million-dollar concrete drain through Shantytown that would empty into the Atlantic. This new drain would replace the old mud drain and thus would remedy the mosquito problem and improve the aesthetics of Shantytown. Though Shantytown had welcomed the intervention, the drain was more for the benefit of hotels destined for the Atlantic Beach near Shantytown. The drainage problem was what had prevented some hotels from moving in. In fact, anticipating the completion of the drain, a hotel had already agreed to move in. So much so that plans were already on the way to relocate a good portion of Shantytown to Contonement (a place at the back of the Brewery), where each displaced home would receive 3000 square feet of land and money to cover their moving expenses. To bote, the move would not cost the government a cent, because the hotel that was coming was putting up all of the four million dollars needed to pay for the land and relocation expenses.

Nevertheless, by the year 2000 the plan had aborted. The Prime Minister said that the hotel that was coming was not willing to pay enough for the land on which the hotel would sit. So the government refused to deal and decided to wait for more generous offers. With this decision Shantytown residents' hopes of owning land were dashed in its infancy.

Looking back one wonders whether the price of land was all the hotel that was coming had been worried about. Upon near completion the new four-million-dollar drain was of no better use than the old, no cost, mud drain. As it turned out, both the Mange and Shantytown are below sea level (no surprise there since that is part of the reason they were swamps in the first place), so instead of the waste water of the four-million-dollar drain emptying into the Atlantic, the Atlantic outflows into it. The water, whether from the ocean or from homes, just sits in the drain. So now Shantytown residents are blessed with two mosquito incubation beds—the no cost, mud drain, and the newly constructed four million dollar drain.

So, if before this new drain, Shantytown was the mecca of mosquitos, now it was their heaven. Alas, the bad comes with the good, for mosquito isn't the only thing for which the four-million-dollar drain is a heaven. The drain is so filled with water that it is now a fishing heaven for all those who enjoy eating *arkenson*.

The unanswered Question

Despite all this Shantytown would not be restrained. Houses have climbed to where even goats would have difficulty reaching. In the bottom, Shantytown has crossed over the road and is threatening to invade the area below Friendship Park graded for a sporting complex that Vieux Fortians are still waiting for. Lucky for the Vieux Fort Combined Primary School. It is fenced. If not Shantytown might have long invaded it. The lands east of the school, including *an ba koko* haven't been as lucky. They were unoccupied, so Shantytown has rapidly moved in. And in the absence of the hotels that are coming, Shantytown has already colonized the beach.

Even more help is coming. Recently, the Poverty Reduction Fund allocated a quarter of a million dollars to build footpaths and drains in Shantytown as they have done in the Mange and the Bacadere. And as part of that process and to bring respectability to Shantytown, it was fittingly renamed Bruce Ville, in honor of the humanitarianism and vision of Mr. (Daddy) Bruce Williams. Whether this means that the government has finally accepted Shantytown as a permanent settlement remains an unanswered question. Footpaths and drains the Mange, the Bacadere (and soon will Shantytown) have, but the people remain as landless (at least legally) as were their parents and grandparents. In that respect history has remained firm.