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# Caribbean Migration into Baytown, Texas



*Inoch of "Jah Colors" at the Houston International Festival showcasing the memorabilia sold at "Jah Colors" Baytown, Texas.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

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**Marcha Thomas-Blades**

LEE COLLEGE

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**T**exas is a region that has received immigrants for centuries. Following the American Indians, migration began in earnest when the Spanish colonized Texas, then known as Tejas, during the early nineteenth century. The purpose of this paper is to examine the origins and developments of a subsequent migration to Texas by Caribbean Islanders who settled in the Gulf Coast

region, primarily Baytown, Texas.

The first migration from the Caribbean to the Gulf Coast of Texas occurring during the early nineteenth century was a forced one, when African slaves from the Caribbean were brought for trade. The Texas coast presented an ideal location for the establishment of a base for privateers, since the region was in close proximity to shipping lanes in the

Gulf of Mexico and the slave trading ports in Cuba. Being 800 miles from Cuba, Galveston became an important port receiving and supplying African slaves from the Caribbean to Anglo-American colonists in Texas after 1821.<sup>1</sup> Approximately one hundred years later in the mid-twentieth century, Caribbean immigrants came to Texas of their own volition seeking jobs and a better life.

several years, until the shareholders of Standard Oil voted to change its name to Exxon Corporation.<sup>5</sup>

The group of contracted laborers brought by Brown & Root to Humble Oil was a mixture of Caribbean Islanders from islands such as Trinidad, St. Lucia, Dominica, Antigua, and Grenada. Brown & Root reaped a Caribbean harvest from the United States Virgin Islands because

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The Caribbean has supplied labor to developed countries since 1950. What is so remarkable about the Caribbean migration is its persistent flow of both legal and illegal migration since 1950. The number of emigrants leaving the Caribbean between 1950 and 1980 totaled four million.<sup>2</sup> It was not surprising that Brown & Root Construction Company turned to the Caribbean for an available source of labor supply. During the late 1960s, Brown & Root recruited skilled workers from the United States Virgin Islands to work at the Humble Oil & Refining Company in Baytown, Texas. Humble Oil & Refining Company was founded in 1901 when oil was discovered in the Spindletop field in Beaumont, Texas.<sup>3</sup> By 1919, Standard Oil of New Jersey had purchased fifty percent of Humble's stocks and by 1959 had completed a merger of the two companies.<sup>4</sup> Despite the merger Humble retained its original name for

the West Indians had been actively involved in inter-island migration since the emancipation of slaves in 1834. After emancipation, ex-slaves wanted to move far away from the plantations. Most established small holdings and became self-employed or sought occupations in the towns. By 1835, opportunities for migration existed mainly in Trinidad and British Guiana, because planters in these territories were not successful in retaining their labor force following emancipation. In Trinidad alone, from a population of 22,359 slaves living and working on estates, only 8,000 remained on the plantations in the post emancipation period. Hence, large landowners in both Trinidad and British Guiana sponsored active recruitment programs on other Caribbean Islands. Workers from Barbados and Grenada were attracted to Guiana and Trinidad.<sup>6</sup>

By the late nineteenth and early

twentieth century emigration from Caribbean Islands had increased tremendously as a result of economic depression and natural disasters. During the 1880s and 1890s, Europe's sugar beet productions took a large portion of the Caribbean's sugar cane market. Consequently, plantations underwent widespread bankruptcies, leading to lower wages and unemployment. In addition, in 1898 Barbados and the Leeward Islands were hit by a hurricane. The following year Monserrat and Nevis suffered the devastation of a hurricane as well, and Jamaica was struck four times by hurricanes between 1911–1921. In 1902, Soufriere, an active volcano, erupted in St. Vincent, claiming 2,000 lives and creating havoc. Thus, for many reasons emigration provided an attractive and practical alternative for Islanders to escape the distress in their homeland.<sup>7</sup>

The construction of the Panama Canal provided a welcome opportunity for Caribbean emigrants. Between 1885 and 1920, the English-speaking Caribbean lost 130,000 of its residents to Panama. By the 1920s Caribbean Islanders' eyes were turning toward oil producing countries as a source of employment. Able-bodied men migrated to Curacao and Venezuela because work was available in developing oilfields in these re-

gions.<sup>8</sup> By 1960, St. Croix, which was the oil-producing island in the United States Virgin Islands, became the primary destination for Caribbean immigrants in search of a better life. Oil companies operating in St. Croix were in desperate need of workers and Caribbean Islanders embraced the opportunity to be paid in U.S. dollars. Brown & Root was able to tap into the Caribbean labor supply by placing recruitment forms at Hess Oil Corporation in St. Croix so workers could complete application for employment.<sup>9</sup>

The first wave of Brown & Root recruits to settle the Gulf Coast region, mainly La Porte, consisted of men who left their families behind in the Caribbean.<sup>10</sup> Generally these workers would send remittances to their homes in the Caribbean so that their families could enjoy a higher standard of living. After these immigrants had adjusted to the new culture and had become financially stable in Texas, they often sent for their families to join them.

By the 1970s, the newcomers' interests were turning to Baytown. During this period Baytown experienced an oil boom and workers were in demand. When Humble Oil & Refining Company was renamed Exxon, Brown & Root recruited more laborers from St. Croix to build the Baytown Olefins Plant (BOP).<sup>11</sup>

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The Islanders resided in a mobile park at Central Heights, which was owned and operated by Mr. Jesse Powell. Mr. Powell provided the basic amenities for the immigrants, including transportation for a fee of seventy dollars a week.<sup>12</sup> Mrs. Dorothy Powell assisted the Caribbean immigrants in adjusting to the Baytown community. She befriended her boarders and she helped them with school enrollment, procuring goods and services, and finding new jobs.

At first, the Caribbean immigrants did not wish to settle permanently in Baytown. However, the friendliness and helpfulness of the Powells, the availability of jobs, the existence of other Islanders, along with the tranquil environment of Baytown, caused the contracted workers to make their home in Baytown even following the termination of the Brown and Root contract. After they had saved sufficient funds, they moved into apartments such as White Hall, Queen Zelda, and The Village.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, Mr. and Mrs. Powell continued to receive new Caribbean immigrants. Most of these newcomers did not enter the United States under contract with Brown & Root but came in search of work. Word spread in St. Croix and Puerto Rico that work was available in Baytown. Many immigrants who had no family in Baytown contacted the Powells to provide housing. Sometimes the Powells would even transport the newcomers from the Houston airport to Baytown. They would also help their new

residents find jobs in the oil refinery. Mrs. Powell estimates that she housed approximately 500 West Indians at her trailer park during the 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>14</sup>

The Caribbean community continued to grow in Baytown as additional Islanders from La Porte moved to Baytown because of the fear of racism. The Klu Klux Klan headquarters was located in Pasadena and this created considerable

concern.<sup>15</sup> Although Baytown provided a friendlier environment, the children of West Indian immigrants did not escape harassment at school. At schools in La Porte Caribbean students were frequently harassed for their accent and skin color. Unfortunately, there were similar experiences in Baytown. Jo Anne

Blanchard, who is presently the marketing director of a Caribbean newsletter which now circulates in Baytown, recalled that her adjustment into the Baytown community was extremely painful, especially at school. From the fifth grade onward she was tormented daily for her accent, clothes, kinky hair, and was even called "nigger."<sup>16</sup> Most of the Caribbean children who attended schools in Baytown in the 1970s and early 1980s reported similar experiences. Consequently, Caribbean youths concluded that their culture was inferior to the American culture, and, therefore, they felt compelled to conceal their Caribbean identity.

In spite of the Caribbean youths'

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perceived need to hide their identity, their parents always kept them in touch with their Caribbean background. Most families continued to prepare Caribbean cuisine, since Mexican produce could be used to improvise for Caribbean produce. In addition, families sometimes got together and had traditional West Indian parties in the privacy of their homes. Even though parents struggled to ensure that their children did not lose their Caribbean identity, they faced problems of their own. The most common difficulties faced by Caribbean immigrants were being a minority group, having inadequate means of transportation, evading conflicts with other ethnic/racial groups, and overcoming the stereotype that characterized them as primitive and uneducated. As a result of these difficulties, Caribbean Islanders chose to exclude themselves from many of the activities in the Baytown community.

In the late 1980s to early 1990s more immigrants had moved to Baytown, not because they were under contract, but via the encouragement of friends and family living in Baytown. Islanders emigrated from the Caribbean as well as other metropolises of the United States and Canada to settle in Baytown. For instance, the parents of Andrea Gardiner, Baytown's renowned figure skater, are native West Indians who moved from New York to reside in Baytown in the early 1980s.<sup>17</sup> For some time Baytown was a utopia for West Indian immigrants. Jobs were readily available, the environment was quite peaceful and serene, and the climate was somewhat tropical. Most Islanders found Baytown to be the ideal

place to build a home and raise a family. In the 1970s, Baytown was a small town, which reminded West Indians of their homeland, hence the reason for the interest Caribbean immigrants continued to have in migrating to Baytown. The Caribbean population increased in the 1980s because it was relatively simple to enter the United States. The United States Immigration laws were not as stringent then as they have become in the latter half of the 1990s. The 1990 population census estimated that 1,081 West Indians resided in Baytown.<sup>18</sup> In other words, one in every sixty-three Baytonians was a Caribbean immigrant.

Apart from the population growth, Caribbean culture has found its place in the Baytown community. There has been an increase in businesses and organizations which promote Caribbean culture. Tony Le Blanc, a native Antiguan, opened the Caribbean Snacks and Produce store in 1987. He made available the various foodstuffs needed for making Caribbean dishes and delicacies. Unquestionably, he increased cultural awareness in regard to Caribbean cuisine.<sup>19</sup> Following Le Blanc's lead was Jah Colors, which opened its doors to the public on August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1992. Chambah and Inoch, formerly known as Chrisnell and Courtney Miller, operate Jah Colors and are native Trinidadians who came from St. Croix in 1976 to join their parents in Baytown. Their business is unique in that it offers a variety of Caribbean memorabilia from music to clothing.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to businesses promoting Caribbean culture, there were also various associations in Baytown which pro-



*A booth at Lee College Carifesta displays Caribbean foodstuff.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

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*The Lee College Caribbean Association, established in 1993 under the sponsorship of faculty members Bill and Elizabeth Grimsley, was the first successful Caribbean Association to operate in Baytown. On Thursday, October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1993 the Lee College Caribbean Association, in cooperation with McDonald's, Jah Colors, and the Caribbean Snacks and Produce, sponsored the first Carifesta held at Lee College.*

moted West Indian culture in recreation and entertainment. There were soccer, cricket, and netball clubs in operation. These sport teams used the Baytown public facilities for training purposes because they lacked the funds to operate as a private sports club. The teams were able to travel to areas such as New York, Miami, and California to compete with other West Indian teams.<sup>21</sup> Caribbean entertainment was provided by The Robe, a nightclub which was owned by Octave Samuel, a native St. Lucian.<sup>22</sup> Prior to the opening of The Robe, Caribbean residents had to visit West Indian nightclubs in Houston in order to listen and dance to Caribbean music, but since 1991 they have been able to enjoy Caribbean entertainment in their hometown.

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sponsorship of faculty members Bill and Elizabeth Grimsley, was the first successful Caribbean Association to operate in Baytown. On Thursday, October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1993 the Lee College Caribbean Association, in cooperation with McDonald's, Jah Colors, and the Caribbean Snacks and Produce, sponsored the first Carifesta held at Lee College. There were a number of displays featuring various aspects of life in the islands of the West Indies.<sup>23</sup> Caribbean students also got the opportunity to showcase their culture with no inhibition through their creative displays during Fall Fiesta and Spring Fling at the Lee College campus. For the first time the Caribbean youths were able to proudly express their culture.

For three consecutive years, from 1994 to 1996, the Lee College Caribbean Association sponsored the Baytown Car-

ibbean Festival. Their efforts met with mixed responses, but in 1994, the Baytown Chamber of Commerce used a photo from the Caribbean Festival to promote Caribbean culture. On Sunday August 27, 1995 the Baytown Sun published the Mayor's proclamation declaring the month of August 1995 Caribbean Heritage Month.<sup>24</sup>

[See Proclamation - below.]

After 1996, with the graduation of Lyton Moses and Claudius Joseph, the Association's activities diminished since it has lost two of its most vibrant and resourceful leaders. Finally, in the fall of 1998 the Lee College Caribbean Association was no more.

Elizabeth Grimsley and Roberta Hector are two individuals who worked faithfully with the Caribbean community.

**CITY OF BAYTOWN**  
**Proclamation**

*WHEREAS, the Lee College Caribbean Association (LCCA) was formed two years ago in response to a growing number of students from the Islands; and WHEREAS, the members of the Caribbean community embrace individuals of various ethnic, religious, and cultural groups and; WHEREAS, activities of this group include the Carifesta on the Lee College campus, the Baytown Caribbean Festival and a parade.*

*Therefore, I, Pete Alfaro, Mayor of the City of Baytown, do hereby proclaim the month of August, 1995, as*

**CARIBBEAN HERITAGE MONTH**

*in Baytown in recognition of our Island population and in support of their efforts.*

*Pete Alfaro*

Grimsley extended warmth and sincerity to the Caribbean youth. Her acceptance of their culture was something they lacked in the 1970s and 1980s. She became a mother and a friend to the Caribbean Association, devoting much of her time to the association's members. She was instrumental in helping club members who experienced legal problems with the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service to become U.S. residents. Hector was also a mother-like figure. She is the matriarch of the Caribbean community in Baytown. She came from Aruba in pursuit of a dream to own a cosmetology school in 1979. By 1992, she owned two cosmetology shops. Apart from her success in business, she has worked diligently with the Caribbean community in Baytown and Houston. She is presently the president of the Baytown Champions, a Caribbean Sports Club, and her cosmetology school building serves as the headquarters for the Baytown Caribbean Association. In addition, she is always willing to assist the Caribbean community in planning cultural events in and around the Gulf Coast region.<sup>25</sup>

The 1990s have been a decade of progress for the Caribbean youth who came as children in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result of the increased acceptance of Caribbean culture within the Baytown community, the younger generation of Caribbean immigrants is no longer trying to hide their identity. Today it is common to see Caribbean youths driving their cars with customized license plates of their first country's flag. However, in spite of their national pride, they do not



*Roberta Hector, matriarch of the Caribbean Community in Baytown. She left Aruba to come to Texas in pursuit of a dream.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

segregate themselves from the Baytown community. Although they are less insecure about their Caribbean background, they have assimilated into the American culture. Subsequently, they enjoy the best of both worlds: Caribbean and American culture.

The experience of Caribbean Islanders in Baytown has been a unique one in that West Indians have formed a united front. The presence of immigrants from the islands of Antigua, Grenada, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, and the U.S. Virgin Islands in the close-knit community of Baytown encouraged an intimate mixing and cultural exchange between islanders. Hence, Baytown allowed for the bonding of people from different islands with a similar background to share in the struggles and successes of making Baytown their home.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Fred Robbins, "The Origin and Development of the African Slave Trade in Galveston, Texas, and Surrounding Areas from 1816 to 1836," *East Texas Historical Journal*, 9 (October 1971): 154.

<sup>2</sup>Barry Levine, *The Caribbean Exodus* (NY: Praeger, 1987), 52.

<sup>3</sup>Henrietta Larson, *History of Humble Oil & Refining Company* (NY: Arno Press, 1959), 22.

<sup>4</sup>Ronald H. Bailey, *Exxon Century of Discovery: An Exxon Album* ed. Ernest Dungbar (New York: Exxon Corporation, 1982), 55.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 42, 55.

<sup>6</sup>Levine, *The Caribbean Exodus*, 19.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>9</sup>Kelvin Jones, interview with author, Baytown, Texas, 11 August 1998.

<sup>10</sup>Claudius Joseph, interview with author, Baytown, Texas, 8 November 1998.

<sup>11</sup>Jones interview.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>Dorothy Powell, interview with author, 21 September 1998.

<sup>15</sup>Joseph interview.

<sup>16</sup>Joanne Blanchard, Roxanne Russell, interview with author, Baytown, Texas, 17 September 1998.

<sup>17</sup>Joanne Blanchard, "West Indian Olympic Hopeful," *Caribbean Vibes Newsletter*, (June-July 1998), 11.

<sup>18</sup>"Social Characteristics for Baytown City, Texas," *Texas 1990 Census*.

<sup>19</sup>Tony Le Blanc, interview with author, Baytown, Texas, 11 August 1998.

<sup>20</sup>Chambah, interview with author, Baytown, Texas, 17 September 1998.

<sup>21</sup>Roberta Hector, interview with author, Baytown, Texas, 15 September 1998.

<sup>22</sup>Joanne Blanchard, "The Robe," *Caribbean Vibes Newsletter*, (September-October 1998), 27.

<sup>23</sup>Whit Snyder, "Carifesta promotes 'a broader awareness of Caribbean culture,'" *The Lantern*, November 4, 1993, 1.

<sup>24</sup>Jane Howard, "Baytown's Caribbean Festival," *The Baytown Sun*, August 27, 1995, 3-A.

<sup>25</sup>Hector interview.

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# In Touch With the Past

