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Unsung heroes



By [Alan Teh Leam Seng](#) - November 26, 2017 @ 2:02pm



"TAK ada barang hari ini. Barang lama susah nak cari sekarang (there's nothing today. It's not easy sourcing for antiques these days)," exclaims one of my suppliers the moment he notices me walking towards his usual spot at the Guar Chempedak morning market.

The crestfallen look on his face says it all. The market for vintage items has indeed fallen on bad times and almost all the dealers and suppliers are feeling the pinch.

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Undaunted by his comments, I proceed to sift through the stuff, recognising several items that have remained unsold for some time.

My heart goes out to him. Antique collectors are fickle people who often follow trends. An item that's currently in demand may not necessarily remain a hot item for long. The fear of being caught high and dry by receding interests often makes suppliers and dealers alike unload their stock quickly. For many, making less is better than having their capital remain stagnant in unsold stock.

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Just as I'm about to turn away, my gaze falls on three rather tired looking foolscap-sized ledgers. The books turn out to be employee registers for a local rubber estate that was in operation back in the early 1950s.

The personal details on every single-sided sheet makes for an interesting read as they include employees involved in almost every sector of the rubber production process, from the grass cutters right up to the smoke house operators and store keepers.

The black and white passport-sized photograph glued beside each entry is useful in helping to put faces to the names of the people in the registry. In addition, other details like the type and condition of the clothes they wore are also revealed. It's not long before I start to feel like I'm forging a close connection with all of those listed.

After flipping through the books from front to back, I realise that the estate workforce consisted of a healthy mix of Malay, Indian and Chinese workers. While many of them weren't related to each other, I notice that several married couples worked for the company.

The entries that pique my interest most are those found in the book with a dark blue cover. Pages 61 and 63 contain details of a family living at the estate. The couple and their 15-year-old son, Govindasamy s/o Verappan worked as rubber tappers.

Meanwhile, there's only a brief mention of their 12-year-old daughter, Anjalai d/o Verappan. Presumably she was too young to belong to the work force.

Govindasamy and his parents joined the company in July 1950 with the father, Verappan s/o Villikarnan, signing up first on July 2. The records show that Govindasamy was later included in the payroll on July 23, just a day before his mother, Mariaye d/o Vythi.

The information and scribbled notes all over the ledgers start to give me an inkling of what life in a Malayan rubber estate must have been like some 67 years ago. Before long, my active imagination starts to wander.

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Glimpse into the past

A typical day in the lives of the people living in rubber estates like the Verappans would have started with the loud ringing of the estate temple bell at four in the morning. The loud sounds would resonate effortlessly in the still of the morning, pervading throughout the living quarters and almost impossible to ignore. The day's routine for everyone would be set in motion by this signal.

During rainy mornings, Verappan would stand near the window at around 5.30 am and listen intently. Loud rings at around this time would mean that the rain was about to stop and work would commence as scheduled. Otherwise, it would be an enforced holiday for the entire estate labour force.

Like the books in my hands, the quarters where Verappan lived with his family were regularly inspected by visiting health department officials to ensure that everything was in order.

The living spaces had to meet all the specified requirements stipulated by the department like sanitation, minimum space allocation and ventilation or else a stop work order would be imposed immediately. This was done to ensure that the welfare of the workers were well taken care of.

Just like most days, Mariaye would leave the bedroom and head straight for the kitchen. Her task would be to prepare both the family's breakfast as well as lunch.

The Verappans led a simple life and their food was nearly the same every day, comprising primarily of steamed rice, fish curry and pickles. Occasionally, Mariaye would prepare fresh thosai and dhal curry for breakfast. As her family tucked into a hearty breakfast, she'd start packing lunch into two separate Tiffin carriers.

The smaller two-tiered food container would be for young Anjalai who attended the estate school, learning Malay, Mathematics, English, and of course, her mother tongue, Tamil. The larger one, which would have four separate compartments would be shared between the couple and their son during their break at 11 o'clock.

Verappan spent very little on food and clothes. Instead, he preferred to shower Mariaye with gold ornaments. To him, these costly purchases from the Chinese goldsmith shop in Guar Chempedak town were



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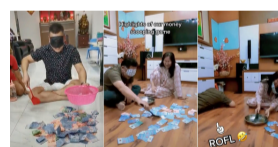
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should the family fall into hard times.

Like most Indian women tappers, Mariaye has a weakness for brightly coloured clothes, including sarees. She would wear them together with all her gold ornaments even when she goes out tapping. After all, the safest place for all her prized belongings must surely be on her person!



A rubber tapper's life

The tips of the eastern sky would already be in a riot of colours by the time the Verappans troop out of their house at 6.30 am. Waving farewell to Anjalai as she heads off along a narrow track, which leads to her school, the trio would join the other workers as they walked in unison to muster (assembly point). There, they'd be assigned their day's task. After that, the workers would climb onto the back of the estate lorry and make their way to their designated tapping areas.

Experienced tappers like Verappan would usually be assigned high level tapping tasks. This he would achieve by placing a crudely made wooden ladder against the rubber tree and climbing up to the section that needed to be tapped. After that, he'd carry the ladder to the next tree and repeat the same process all over again. By 11 am, Verappan would have tapped about 300 trees and been paid a daily wage of between \$3.20 and \$3.60. Like all tappers, his wages would be at the mercy of the fluctuating world rubber prices.

At the same time, Govindasamy and his mother would be tapping trees at the lower level. Between them, they can complete tapping about 800 trees before they meet up with Verappan to have their early lunch.

Tapping is a delicate job that cannot be rushed. The tree will be permanently wounded if the tapper cuts too deep.

On the other hand, very little latex is collected if the cut is too shallow. After excising the bark, the tapper would fasten a cup on the lower level of the trunk to collect the latex.

By 11.30am, lunch would be over. The tappers would then fan out to collect the latex. They'd pour the latex into two buckets supplied by the estate before suspending the galvanised aluminium buckets on either end of a long pole balanced across their shoulders.

The latex would be destined for the receiving station located in the centre of the estate. There, the latex would be weighed by a conductor and the reading recorded by his assistant. Finally, the whitish fluid would be transferred into a waiting tanker.

monthly basis. Pay days were special days for the workers in the rubber estate. On these days, tappers like the Verappans would stop by the estate store on their way home from work to spend part of their hard earned cash. The store would be a combination of a grocer, wet market and coffee shop, all rolled into one. Most of the purchases would be for daily necessities like rice, sugar, cooking oil and flour.

A second look at the books reveals several slips of paper hidden in between the last few pages of the green-covered ledger. They turn out to be payment receipts issued by the estate store in favour of the tappers who'd have settled their outstanding debts.

Studying the receipts yields some interesting information about commerce in the estates. Although prices of consumables were very much lower compared to today, they were considered expensive relative to the salary earned by the labourers back in the 1950s.

To supplement their meagre income, people like Verappan would spend their late afternoons and evenings tending to livestock like goats and chickens. Others planted vegetables around their houses to help reduce the cost of living.

In the meantime, young lads like Govindasamy would spend most of their leisure hours playing football at the solitary estate field near the workers' quarters. It was every boy's dream to secure a place in the estate team and win a silver cup in the local championship.

Fridays were special days as the boys got to play friendly matches against teams from other nearby estates in Bedong, Kuala Muda and Sungai Petani.

After dinner, most people living in the rubber estates would head off to the estate cinema hall, located next to the store. There, they'd watch re-runs of popular feature films. It was during these times that the labourers got the chance to forget their aching joints and allow movie magic to transport them away into perfect make-believe worlds.





Formal photographs were only taken during very important occasions.

Down memory lane

By the time I return the ledgers to the seller, I had the urge to visit this particular rubber estate to get a firsthand look. Determining the location is easy. The payment receipts contain the address of the estate store and I presume that must also be where the estate is situated.

After driving for about three kilometres along the Guar Chempedak-Bukit Junun road, I arrive at my intended destination. Imagine my utter dismay when I discover that the place is now filled with residential houses and a smattering of shop lots. There's not a single rubber tree in sight!

Determined to discover the fate of the rubber estate, I walk over to a nearby coffee shop and strike up a conversation with the proprietor.

Having lived in this area all her life, the woman remembers the rubber estate vividly. As a child, she used to follow her brothers there to collect rubber seeds. It seemed that the estate owner gave up his business when rubber prices slumped to a record low in the 1990s. The land was subsequently sold to a housing developer.

Asked about the fate of the tappers, she tells me that by the time the company closed down, the workforce had shrunken to a fraction of what it used to be back in the 1950s.

"Most of the estate children received government assistance to further their studies in colleges and universities. They brought their parents to stay with them as soon as they secured decent jobs in cities like Kuala Lumpur and Johor Baru."

Resigned to the fact that I'll never get to see the estate or even remnants of it, I decide to head back to Guar Chempedak town and strike a deal to buy the ledgers. At least that way I'll be able to preserve the memories of the Verappans and their fellow tappers who had contributed so much to the development our rubber industry in the past.



Tappers resting at the estate store after a hard day's work.

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