Philatelic Society of Trinidad & Tobago

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Bulletin

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Part 3: Nature, Tourism and Labour Relations at the Pitch Lake

by Susan Taylor



Figure 1: Green Heron

This is the third and final article in the Pitch Lake series. Surprisingly there is actually quite a lot of wildlife in and around the Pitch Lake. Guppies (small freshwater fish, sometimes known as million fish or rainbow fish) inhabit the waters. It's an extreme environment, but is thought to act as a refuge from parasites and other pathogens. Bird watchers will catch glimpses of herons, hummingbirds, kingfishers and sandpipers at the site. The fauna around the lake includes water rose, bird of paradise and nymph lilies. Interestingly the "Pocket Guide to the West Indies" by Alernon E. Aspinall, published in 1914 states "A peculiarity of the spot is the presence of a singularly unattractive breed of pelicans".

Fondly called the "Eighth Wonder of the World" by villagers, the Pitch Lake is a source of amazement and mystery. It's astonishing that something resembling a disused carpark attracts so many tourists. The "Pitch Lake" is the largest, commercial deposit of natural asphalt in the world, holding about 10 million tonnes of asphalt.

The Pitch Lake has been the subject of many postcards. The one to the right is was addressed to the Fort De France Roman Catholic Diocese of Martinique. The maritime marks on the card are desirable, but not uncommon on Trinidad Mail at this period. They were applied on board one of the steamers of the Compagnie



Figure 2: 26 Dec 1912 postcard

Generale Transatlantique ("CGT" - the French rival of RMSP between Europe and the Caribbean). The strikes are not altogether clear, but Cayenne a Fort de France was either Ligne Annexe ("Branch Line") C or D, connecting with their Transatlantic Service at Fort de France. The steamers on this route in 1912 were *Manoubia*, *Ville de Tanger*, *Salvador* and *Saint-Domingue*.

The 1914 Pocket Guide to the West Indies states "To go to Trinidad without visiting the Pitch Lake would be like going to Rome without entering St. Peters". The Guide describes how, at that time, a corduroy road, made of palm branches supported a cable tramway, on which buckets of the pitch were conveyed to the jetty known as Brighton Pier. The below 1904 postcard Illustrates the buckets. Interestingly it went from Port of Spain via New York and San Francisco before getting to Tasmania.

And finally, this paquebot postcard (Figure 4) is even more interesting, postmarked 24.2.31 in Colon, Panama. The card was posted on board the Italian cruise ship *S.S. Vulcanian* (launched in 1926 and one of the largest 2 stroke diesel ships of its time).

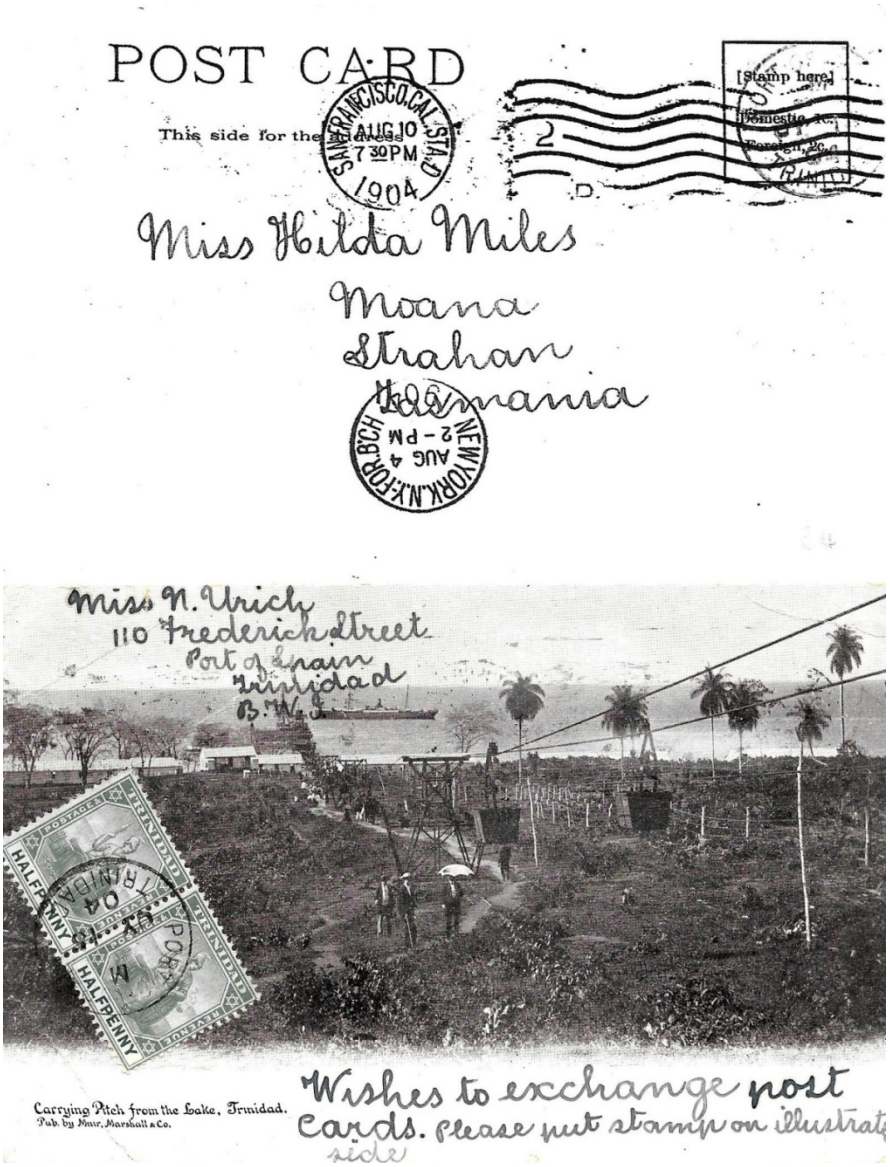


Figure 3:3 August 1904 postcard

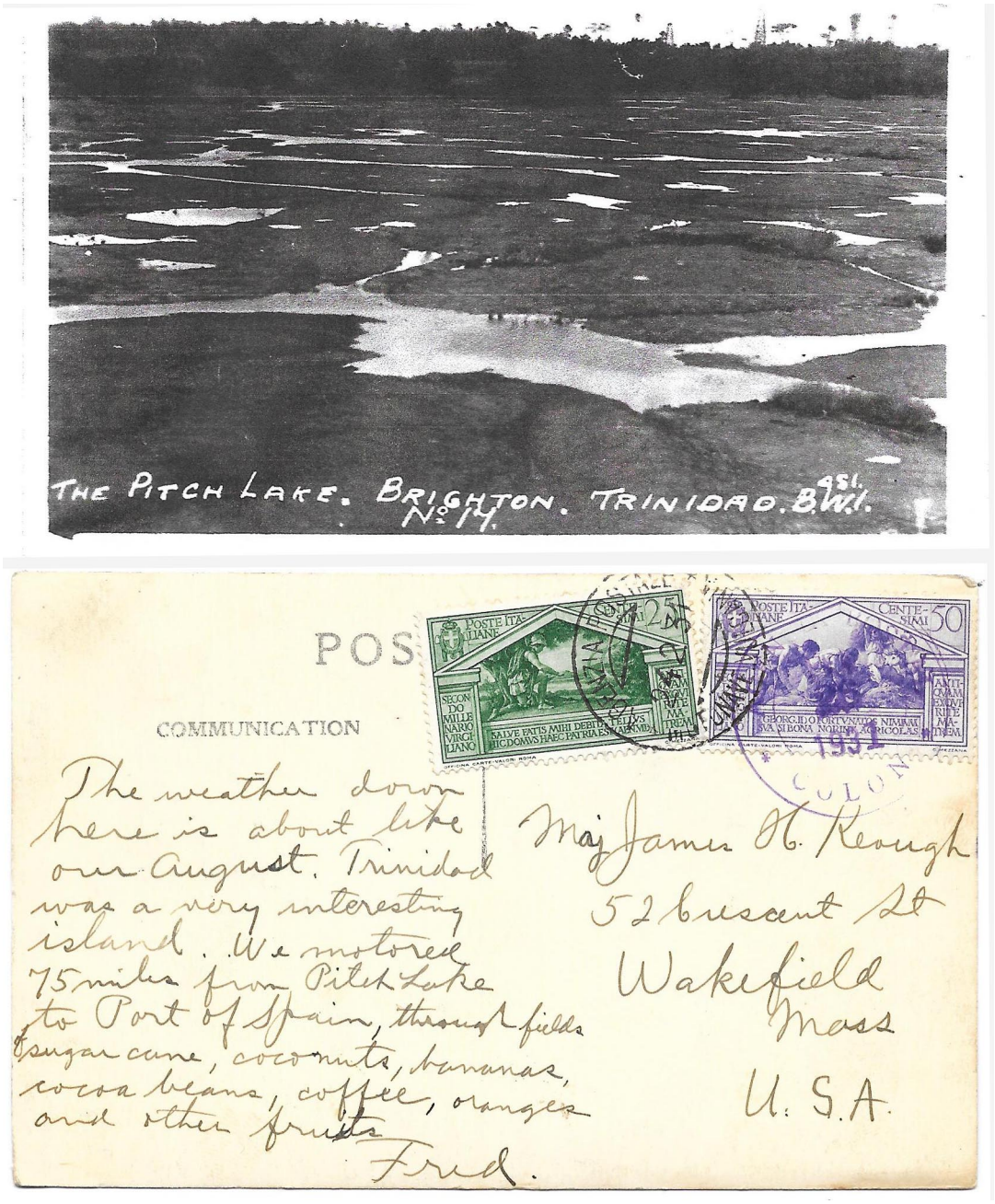


Figure 4:24 Feb 1931 postcard

The site also had significance to the indigenous people of Trinidad and Tobago. They had their own ideas as to how the lake was formed. After a victory over a rival tribe, the tribe got carried away with its celebration, cooking and eating the sacred humming birds they believed held the spirits of their ancestors. Thus, legend has it, their winged god opened up the earth and conjured up a lake of nasty pitch to swallow the entire village. Amerindian pottery has been found, along with remains of prehistoric animals.

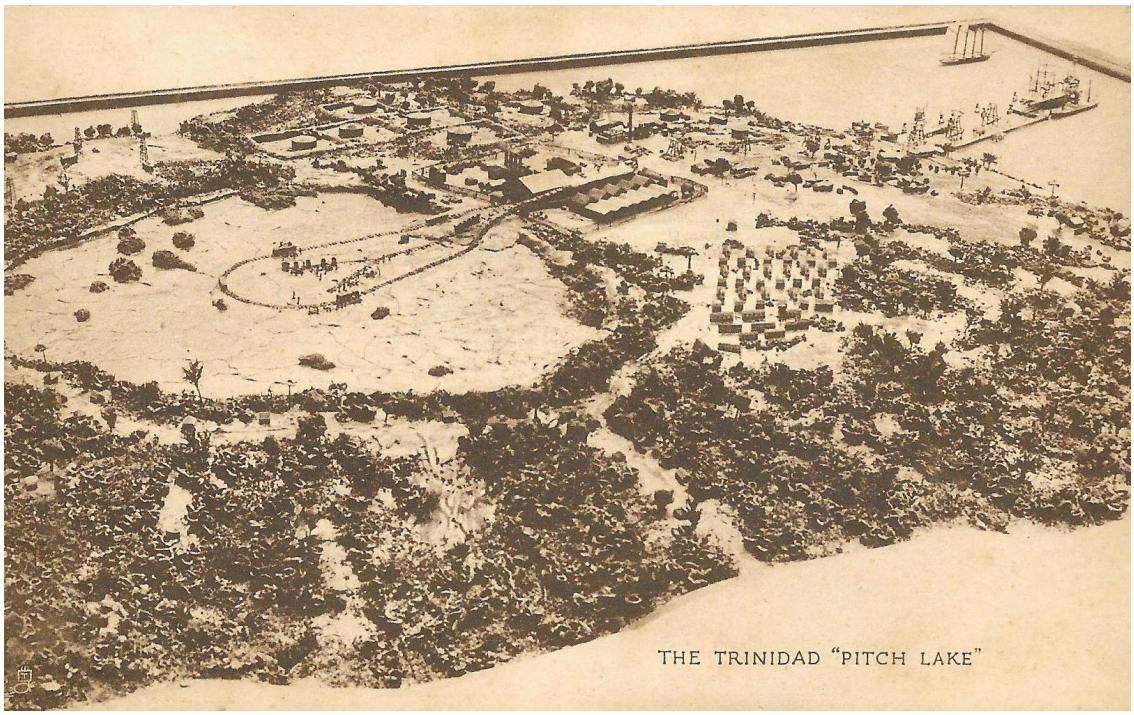


Figure 5: Aerial view of the Pitch Lake

The La Brea Pitch Lake has attracted about 20,000 visitors annually. It's interest to the wider world is demonstrated by Collectors Cards:



Figure 6: Empire Industries and Trex Club cards

The Pitch Lake has been a tourist attraction since the early 1900's as demonstrated by this photograph (which also clearly demonstrates the poverty of the worker and his working conditions).



Figure 7; Photo of worker and tourists

The lake does look like a large car park, but on closer inspection is comprised of very dark clay. Visitors can walk on the surface, which makes hissing and burping sounds. People occasionally swim in the waters of the pitch lake which some say is therapeutic because of the sulphur content

Escalation of the exploitation of the Pitch Lake and the development of the oil industry in the early 1900's coincided with abolition of Indentured Labour. The 1914 guide states "The lake is at present leased to the New Trinidad Lake Asphalt Co. Ltd… The white employees of the Company used to reside on Brighton Pier, which consequently resembled a lake village. Now however the whole forest has been cut down and they are accommodated in a group of charming houses which looks quite like a garden suburb… The whole of this district has undergone a remarkable change in recent years as a result of the development of the local petroleum industry". No mention is made of the non-white employees. It is said that in 1920, 1200 souls laboured, walking many miles to oilfields, manually digging the fields, and employed in a manner that was "reeking with the taint of slavery" - CR Dawley. Landowners used a "Red Book" for employment that kept records of services and was

used for coercion and black-balling, with provisions for undefinable offences. White workers were provided with accommodation and medical attention, but black workers were not usually afforded the same considerations. Pay was minimal, and at a time of inflation, held down. It is therefore unsurprising that a labour movement formed under the leadership of Uriah Butler. In 1937 an attempt to arrest Butler at a rally led to protest and the death of a police officer. The situation escalated and resulted in the arrival of two warships in Trinidad. Today Butler and many of his contemporaries are recognised as heroes of their time. These stamps acknowledge the contribution of those labour leaders.



Figure 8: Stamps featuring Labour Leaders



Figure 9: Workers at the Pitch Lake