



In the Shadows of the Jaguar

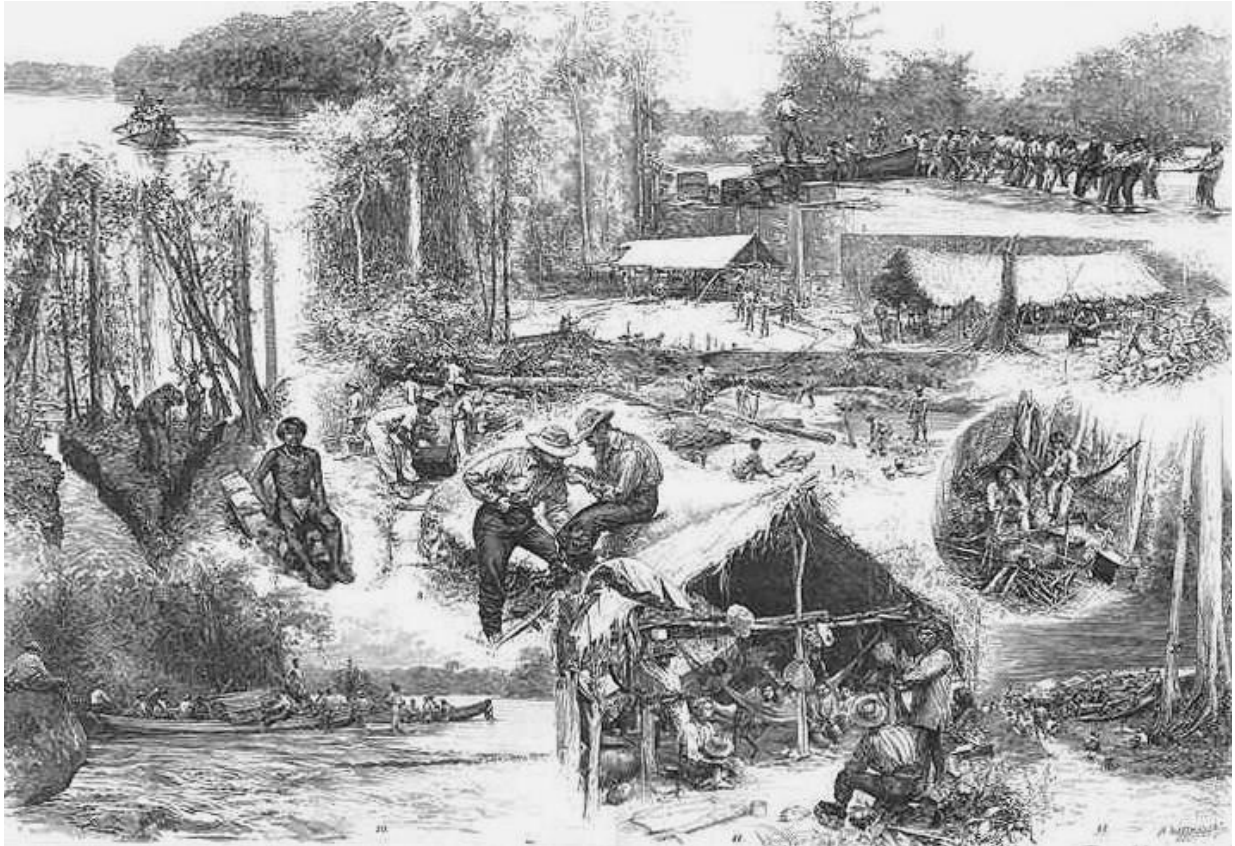
The Legendary Porknocker

By Dmitri Allicock

New “shouts” of gold deep in wild of 1800s Guyana lured the individual gold prospector and gave birth to the legendary Porknocker. Leathery men left the comforts of their homes in Guyana and around the Caribbean for the inhospitable interior armed with only spade and battel, in search for that golden salvation of hesperides and became an unfathomed reservoir of stories, myths, legend and incarnation fiction without boundaries.

For thousands of years gold was a part of the history of the native people of the Americas and Guyana and the association of gold attracted the attention of many early explorers of written history. It was even suggested that Guyana was the source of the elusive and legendary city of El Dorado, fabled for its great wealth of gold and precious jewels. In 1595, prompted by the great riches brought back from South America by the Spanish, Sir Walter Raleigh, Captain of her Majesty's Guard, embarked from London on an expedition in search of the city of El Dorado.

Raleigh's expedition penetrated hundreds of miles up the Orinoco River and into Guiana's Highlands where he found some mineral specimens that contained gold. Upon his return, Raleigh published "The Discoveries of the Large Rich and Beautiful Empire of Guiana" with a relation of the Great and Golden City of Manoa, which the Spaniards call El Dorado.



The discovery of Gold in the late 1850s led to the formation of The British Guiana Mining Company, whose fortunes were sought in the rich Gold and Diamond fields of Guyana's Highland. Gold was also found and mined in other parts of Guyana including Lucky Spot and Kanaimpoo on the Demerara River but endless "shouts" of the Highlands dwarf others of any significance.

Men from coastal villages and cities possessing little knowledge of the interior, ventured into the vast forest both individually or in groups, braving the many waterways, hundreds of tumbling rapids and waterfalls of the hostile wild, dug, panned for gold and diamond along the banks of rivers, creeks, and ravines. Poisonous and deadly reptiles, wild cats of Guyana, with reigning King Jaguar, malaria mosquitoes, waterborne diseases and fever awaited the intruders who dared to defy a million years of an untouched world equipped with a thousand ways to inflict pain and death.

The ability of the Porknocker to withstand adversities of the harsh jungle life mixed with his reputation for big spending, rum drinking and womanizing became legend. These men and their stories have generated a corpus of tales and mythology.

They have found their way into folklore and because of their existence “in the bush” there lore is associated with other folk material and traditions that have come out of the superstitious beliefs of that environment.

There are different versions of the origin of the name ‘Porknockers,’ but one of the most popular is that it comes from the fact that because they spend lengthy periods in the bush their staple diet was dried, cured or salted pork. Even the spelling like all forms in the oral tradition, is not standard. It has appeared as pork knockers, porknockers and even porkknockers.

The established entrance into the highlands was through Bartica, called the gate way to the interior. Bartica is situated at a junction of the [Essequibo River](#), 50 miles (80 km) inland from the Atlantic Ocean, and occupies a unique natural location in north-central Guyana where the mighty Essequibo, Mazaruni, and Cuyuni rivers meet and is still the launching point for Guyana’s gold and diamond miners.

Bartica was originally granted for religious uses and was one of the earliest Anglican missionary settlements in the colony under British rule. The original site was about a mile to the west of Grove, where a grant of land was obtained from Governor Sir Benjamin D’Urban. The mission was removed to its present position in 1837. It was chosen and founded as a central depot from whence the gold industry could be regulated, a place where laborers registered, where boats inspected and licensed, where magistrates adjudicate upon gold disputes, where hospitals for the sick could be established, a lock-up for the disorderly, where the dead could be buried and the living entertained.

At Bartica and other settlements, waited the best liquor gold could buy and ladies that didn’t require patience of civilized courtship, to separate the isolated and deprived Porknocker from his bounty. Rumors of scamps and vagabonds like the sirens of myths, flocked to greet those whose handsome reward lasted as long as laughter and song.

Many Porknockers would not return home until they had something substantial to validate for their long absence from wife and children. Homes were left for long periods without any support and mothers had to provide single handedly for the family as extended periods of 6 months or even a year would see homes fatherless, facing hardship and economic uncertainty.

The great difficulty with gold mining lay with the tortuous and deadly journey from Bartica to the goldfields of Guyana highlands. The rivers are sown with countless rapids and dangerous passes where the lives of many Porknockers were lost to the lust for gold.

It seems that the ancient Amerindian legends were true where these rushing waters dragged down into their dark depths all those who attempt passage without appeasement.

New and safer access was sought after. The idea was born to construct a railway from Wismar to Rockstone. The calm and navigable Demerara River had the width and depth to allow ocean-going vessels up to Wismar then the railway would continued the journey to Rockstone on the Essequibo, with transportation from Rockstone via launches to Tumatumari and the distant mining area of Kurupung.

The 1897 Demerara Essequibo railway [DER] was then established and provided valuable and safe transportation for Porknockers, commuters, and cargo between Essequibo and Demerara.

In November 1933, a bridge was constructed over the Garraway Stream, linking the gold town Mahdia to Bartica by trail called [THE 1933 DENHAM SUSPENSION BRIDGE OF GUYANA'S HINTERLAND](#). This cable suspension bridge was named “Denham Bridge” after the then Colonial Governor Sir Edward Denham. The Denham Suspension Bridge, which is also called the Garraway Stream Bridge, served as a vital access to the early Gold and Diamond fields of Guyana.



The porknockers inspired the imagination of generations to write inspirational poems and books. These included the fictional novel **Black Midas** by Jan Carew, an account of the legend of the famous Porkknocker Ocean Shark. Educational Broadcast Corp. produced a remarkable presentation **Up River through Guyana** in 1993 which highlighted the search for the esteemed Porkknocker of Guyana. The very latest in this long and noble line of publications is **An Illustrated History of the Pork Knockers** (2010) by Barrington Braithwaite. Other works are in drama: a play **Porkknockers** by Sheik Sadeek and another **Makantali** by Harold Bascom. There is also a remarkable and popular folk song named **Itanami**, whose lyrics captures the awe and fear of the Porkknocker and surrounding dangerous rapid/ waterfall named Itanami of Guyana.

Porknockers and the tradition of porkknocking are still practiced in Guyana and exist alongside new gold companies extracting gold from the land of El Dorado. Folk songs, legendary figures, folklores, dangerous waterways and animals, Bartica- the capital of the Porknockers, dreams of that big strike, lives on in the mind of Guyanese who continues to identify with the carefree and wishful spirit of the Legendary Porkknocker of cultural heritage.