

Growing up in Katong Part I

By Cynthia Wee-Hoefer

I grew up in Katong on a rather dusty lane that led on one side to the original Marine Parade, a seaside promenade, and to the main East Coast Road on the other. I recall a childhood swirling with the language, habits and culture of the Peranakans who lived alongside the Eurasians, China-born Chinese, Boyanese Malays, Jews and an exotic parade of Indians of all castes and colours. This was Singapore at the end of British rule and the dawn of independence.

Katongites and trishaw riders affectionately knew our lane as *Longkang Besar*, which translates as Big Drain Road, for the large open drain that channeled water and debris from inland to the sea at Marine Parade. It baffled me that others referred to it as Jacob's Lane. Only recently I learned that a tall, dark and skinny Eurasian named Jacob had lived there.

The lane was obscure, tucked between a row of double-storeyed shophouses and elegant setback terraced residences on the main road. When giving instructions to friends and taxi drivers, I had to say that it was after the Joo Chiat traffic lights, the small lane on the right opposite the Shell station.

Our beloved sandy lane was flanked by neat rows of raised terrace houses with curlicue frescoed fronts, patterned mosaic steps and a narrow verandah. The houses were pretty and deep to accommodate three bedrooms, a living room, a dining room and a kitchen covered by a zinc roof. There was a toilet (originally a bucket system but modernised years later), a bathroom and an airy basement that worked as additional storage space, sleeping quarters and hide-and-seek playground. High walls that separated us from the neighbours enclosed our courtyard, but the noises still penetrated, providing lots of juicy details when family quarrels exploded. A door to the back lane served us well when the *tongpoon* lady came by daily to pick up swill for the pig farm. It also came in handy when we had to run from the 'wrath of the *rotan*', the long rattan whipping cane that was brandished when we misbehaved.

In those days, we were surrounded by greenery and nature. At the entrance stood a mature frangipani tree, which we turned into a tree house, and fruiting guavas, while rows of spider lilies and periwinkles bordered the drain. Giant tamarind and flame of the forest trees provided shade. We were never short of *assam* or *biji sagar* seeds for our five-stone games.

The boys had an unlimited supply of fighter spiders, which were stored in matchboxes with a single leaf for food and spittle for drink. The moths and insects attracted to the lights at night were caught and showed off and later released. My favourite was an insect that had a hard shell at its thorax. When pressed against the matchbox or tin



Author's mother, Madame Soh Ong Neo (third from left), dressed in sarong kebaya

case, its head would instinctively knock the surface several times, which made a great game where we had to guess the number of times the insect would knock against the box.

The lane was always pot-holed in areas and a bane for the poor trishaw rider or the hawkker with his tricycle. On rainy days we had to tread carefully over the puddles. Woe to the newcomer at night who, with one wrong step, could end up with soaked feet and trouser cuffs.

On rainy days we caught tadpoles, which we took to school for science class. During the dry season, we had to sprinkle water from a tin can to keep down the dust. Resourceful as children are, we found endless uses for the bare ground. With simple strokes of a stick, we created hopscotch diagrams, circle games and start and finish lines for our endless races along the traffic-free lane. We dug holes for *bolah lasing*, a game in which a player rolled a tennis ball towards an arrangement of holes in the ground. If it dropped into your hole, you had to grab the ball and try to hit one of the other players. If you failed, you had to stand with your back facing the others while someone got to hit you with the tennis ball. Whatever game caught our fancy – marbles, hide-and-seek, rounders – it was almost always played *en masse* with the neighbourhood children, and outdoors in the late afternoon when the sun was about to set.

Editor's note: stay tuned for more on life in Katong in upcoming issues of PASSAGE.

Cynthia Wee-Hoefer, a women's magazine and newspaper journalist most of her career, likes to think of herself as a *nonya* thoroughbred who promotes Peranakan culture through her writing for the Peranakan Association Singapore. As a member of FOM, she hopes to widen her personal approach to what being a Peranakan is about.
