

The Times of My Life

Memories of a Queenstown Childhood By Charlotte Chu

Streets of the British Monarchy - Prince Philip Avenue, Prince Charles Square, Margaret Drive – that was the Queenstown area of Singapore where I grew up in the 1960s. As a child, I didn't realise that the area had been built by the British Colonial Government during the 1950s as one of the first housing estates to accommodate the many squatters who until then had lived in slums.

Home was a three-storey block of Singapore Improvement Trust flats (the British predecessor to the Housing and Development Board or HDB); sadly, many of these uniquely-designed apartments have been replaced by spanking new high-rise buildings. My small flat had two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen linked to a toilet and a bathroom and – my favourite space – a balcony! No three-room flats these days can boast of a balcony. Eight of us lived there, my parents and six children, but it didn't feel crowded; I was too busy having fun to notice.

I had a wonderful carefree childhood where play was the order of the day. No preschool for me – my learning occurred on the streets. I was the only girl my age and was subjected to the same rules as the boys when it came to play – but a tomboy, I didn't care.

Every day was filled with games of 'rounders' (equivalent to softball) or *hantam bola* (hitting ball), like the 'poison ball' that kids play nowadays. Hide and Seek, where one of the best hiding places was the drain, *goli* (marbles), kites and fighting spiders were all favourites.



On a slide on the balcony of my flat

The Moon Cake Festival and Chinese New Year were times of great excitement. I remember during one Moon Cake Festival, after our usual lantern parade around the neighbourhood, we made a small fire with twigs to heat water in my metal play cooking pot, then we cooked grass in it. The boiled grass smelled so good we wanted to eat it! That night I got bitten on my face by a caterpillar and ended up with an awful, itchy mark in the same shape.

I looked forward to Chinese New Year as I would get my customary new set of clothes (we could afford new clothes only once a year) and red *ang-pow* packets of money. Best of all were the now-illegal firecrackers our family set off.

School was an adventure for me, and since I did not go through 'Kindy', everything in primary school seemed new and interesting, especially as I only learned to speak English then. Spelling time in Primary Two was a bit stressful: getting just one word wrong earned us a hit on the palm with a long wooden ruler. Oddly, I don't remember many of us crying, although it was really painful.

The drainage system was not well-established, so flooding was common. I loved the wet days – school being cancelled meant floating our paper boats on the water. In those days, drains were not fenced and when it poured, streets and drains became indistinguishable. I liked to stand on the balcony of my flat alerting unwary pedestrians to the open drain. At first, passers-by were startled, but when they understood, they appreciated my warning.

How carefree and simple life was then: when computers and electronic games were 'alien things', when all the fun and experiences to be had were in the great outdoors, and when having to live with what little we had taught priceless lessons. Those 'times of my life' helped shape me as a person and I am so glad for the memories.

Charlotte Chu works as a therapist with children who have autism. She is also a qualified Singapore Tourist Guide who enjoys introducing visitors to lesser-known aspects of the city's culture and history.

Photos courtesy of the author



Top: With my brother and sister in front of the National Theatre

Right: I'm the shortest one with my three elder sisters in front of my flat

