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Singapore: Multiple Races, One Nation

National Day 9th August

By Mei Mei Moore

“Stand up for Singapore, do the best you can...” Every Singaporean and long-term resident knows this patriotic song. Composed in mid-1980 and still sung today, the lyrics couldn’t be more apt for a dynamic environment where there is no time for sitting down anyway. After separation from Malaysia and independence in 1965, Singapore had no time to mope, but had to move on and work hard and smart. In an impressively short span of time Singapore evolved to become a first-world country despite potentially divisive factors such as race, language and religion. The late S Rajaratnam (former Deputy Prime Minister and one of the country’s pioneer leaders) wrote the National Pledge in 1966. He knew that for Singapore to succeed, its multi-ethnic groups must unite as one people.



First National Day Parade

Singapore held its first National Day Parade (NDP) in 1966, a year after separation. It was held in the historically significant Padang, a place that has borne witness to several major events in Singapore’s history. It was close to the Padang that Sir Stamford Raffles first set foot in 1819, it was at the Padang that the Japanese surrendered to Lord Louis Mountbatten in 1945 and in 1959 it was here that the nation witnessed the installation of its first president, the Yang

di-Pertuan Negara, Yusof bin Ishak. From the Padang the NDP moved to the National Stadium (currently being rebuilt) and is now held at The Float@Marina Bay, an atmospheric location surrounded by water and near the Esplanade.

NDP tickets get snapped up like hot cakes! However, watching the fireworks and the parade on TV with family and friends has its merits too. You can see Mr Lee Kuan Yew up-close-and-personal; he always inspires admiration and reverence. When I was growing up, my family and I sat in front of the TV almost every 9 August and watched Mr Lee arrive and walk up the red carpet.

When I was a schoolgirl, I looked forward to the eve of National Day. Our school had a celebration in the main hall where we sat to watch performances of folk dances from the four major cultural groups: Malay, Chinese, Tamil and also Western. Afterwards, we received goody bags. In some lucky years, there were even *Twinkles* (chocolate candies) in the bags.

As a student overseas, I joined the Singapore Club and continued to enjoy the National Day celebrations. There were always generous organisations that sponsored Singapore foods such as *laksa*, *satay*, *mee siam* and *Nyonya kueh* for the buffet. And there was always a Singapore Airlines ticket to be won. We would wear Singapore dress such as the Malay *kebaya*, the Indian *sari*, or the Chinese *cheong sam*. The boys generally wore *batik* shirts. On those occasions I always felt Singaporean rather than Chinese.

Twenty years ago I often had to explain where the little island nation of Singapore was. Today when I travel, I am asked about places such as Orchard Road, Sentosa and Marina Bay and also about the well-being of the most famous Singaporean, Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Singapore, once a sleepy fishing village, is now well-known world-wide.



NDP now being held at the Float@Marina Bay

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Photos courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore