

*The Golden Era
in
Benque Viejo
with
Unforgettable People*



My name is Angela Mendez and I am a student at the University of Belize studying for a Bachelors degree in Social Work.

During my course studies I needed to complete placements with organizations that would provide me with a good social work experience and I therefore chose to work with the National Council on Ageing to obtain a greater understanding of working with older persons in the community.

This booklet is the product of my interviews with older people in Benque Viejo del Carmen, which is a very interesting community as a border town to Guatemala.

I found the interviews both candid and extremely informative and I hope that you will be as enlightened as I was by these older people.

I must thank the staff at the National Council on Ageing for their interest and support during the period of my placement.

Ms. Angela Mendez
Ba Social Work Student

2008

Introduction:

Interviewing these beautiful people from Benque Viejo makes me feel so proud of myself. These are some people of the Golden Era that will never be forgotten. These persons can still remember so much from their past lives and the town itself. Even though some of them remembered some hard times it still made them feel very happy and proud of what they lived before.

Among them Aurora Iglesias; Areopagita Puc; Elena Ayala; Elvira Duarte; Francisco Glicerio Contreras; Julia Pérez; Julio Cesar Alvarado Sr.; Ofelia Castellanos de Lima; Sarita Pacheco and Francisco Trinidad Méndez, who passed away on March 30th, 2008, will always be remembered.

These people will always be remembered as important people from the Golden Era in Benque Viejo.



Aurora Iglesias
2008

March 11th,

“Mrs. Lola A”

I was born on the 22nd of November in Flores, Guatemala. My mother’s name was Damiana and my father was Don Reyes and they were both from Flores, Peten.

I came out of school when I was 8 years old. I think I didn’t like going to school and I preferred to work home grinding things on rocks. I still have my rocks where I used to grind and my irons, the kind that you used to put on top of the “comal” so they would get hot. My mom used to put me to work at that young age as she always used to say that that is what girls were for, to work.

I used to wear long dresses and stockings, which I didn’t like but they were gifts from my uncle so I had to wear them. I remember when men used to visit me my mother and father weren’t really far away from us. We could be having a conversation and they would be close by hearing and keeping an eye out for me.

I was an only child because, although I had a little brother, he died when he was 5 years old.

Ciriaco Baños was my boyfriend and although he had permission to visit me from my mother he did not have permission from my father. People told me that he was also visiting another girl by the name of Ana Sosa, so one day I decided to follow him along with my cousin, Flores Leopoldo Torres. Having called to visit me he told me he had to go around 7, so I told my cousin that we should go follow him, so we did that and we hid behind a house where we could not be seen because it was dark. I saw that he and Ana came out of her house and sat down by the door. My cousin grabbed my arm and we went up to them and I heard him telling her “Lolita is coming”. I said goodnight and I told him that what we had was over because a man who has 2 women didn’t love either

one. I returned all his stuff and I gave him back the engagement ring he had given me. I told him that my cousin was my boyfriend and he got so angry he went to the riverbank and threw everything I had returned to him in the river. I didn't really care because it was his money that he was throwing away. The following night he went to my house and tried talking to me, but it was over and I didn't want anything to do with him again, plus my parents were so angry at him too and everything ended that day.

I got married to Martin when I was 17 years old. Martin was a young man I met and it was kind of funny because he was going to get married with Ana Sosa but he told me that things didn't work out between them because she was seeing Ciriaco and him at the same time. He told me "you're 15 years old and I want to marry you but I'll wait until you become 17 years old before we get married". I accepted and he told me that he would be sending me checks so that I could save them up and when the time comes I could use that money to buy myself a wedding dress and everything that I needed for the wedding. He told me that he would be giving a man that goes to the USA the money and to write down whatever I wanted so the man could get it for us. Then one day Ana came up to me and asked me if it was true that I would be getting married, and I told her yes it's true and I showed her my wedding dress.

Melita was my Godmother and Salomon "chomon" Guerra was my godfather. The day of the wedding came and my mother didn't go to the wedding because she didn't want me to get married. However my father went and he got very drunk, because there was a lot to drink and eat.

I couldn't have children, so my husband took me to the "curandero" Mr. Elijio Panti, and he told me that my womb was low, so he rubbed me and after 2 months, when I didn't see my menstruation, I went for a check-up and they told me that indeed, I was pregnant! I had a very beautiful and healthy baby boy, with light skin and yellowish hair. Time passed and I had my daughter, who was born with a heart problem. After that Rosa was born and she's now living in Corozal. The good thing is that I was never operated and I had all of my children the natural way.

I lost my vision, while I was preparing some banana leaves to make "bollos", I remember I got a very strong headache and my eyes got swollen. I went to see doctor Valdez, and he told me that he would operate on me, he did and I got blind. Then I went to see another doctor and he told me that doctor Valdez was just practicing on me because I had a sickness called Glaucoma. I also suffer from blood pressure.

My youngest daughter died at the age of 27, she had a shock of some kind that she never recovered from. I took her everywhere I could; Stann Creek, Chetumal, San Benito but they told me that she would still die. She lived in Cayo with her husband Rodolfo Rodriguez.

A month after my daughter died, my husband Martin died on December, 7th.

My mother died eight days after my father. She had told me that the house was mine to live in after her death.

Love is a beautiful thing, but it can be very sad as well.



March 8th, 2008

Areopagita Puc A.K.A. Doña Pajita

I am 81 years of age and was born on April 5th. I will soon be 82 years old. My fathers name is Lonato Puc and my mothers name is Carmen Guzman.

When I was young, I used to live in the house where "Isau" lives now, that's where I was born and where I grew up. As there were no clinics, as there are now, my grandmother was the one who brought me into the world.

I went to primary school, which at that time was run by the nuns of the catholic church. I reached up to standard 6 and that's where I stopped studying. When I was 12 years of age my mother, who was going through her menopause or "change of life" as how we call it, was left blind due to what she was going through. I was still in school and we all helped out my mother.

When I was young, I used to love going with my father to the farm, I used to invite some of my friends and we all used to go cut firewood, carry water and we used to come back in the later afternoon.

I remember one day the river rose and our house was flooded and some people came to take us out of our house. After some time had passed my older brother and sister got married and then it was only me and my other sister left with my mom. My father was a farmer and everyday before school I used to wake up early to help my

mother out with the grinding of “cun” or corn. When I came back from school I used to make tortillas for lunch and after we all ate we washed the dishes and headed back to school. In the late afternoon it was time for dinner and I had to help my mom out, she also used to take care of 2 of her nephews.

I used to love to dance and I still love it to this very day. My friends, Claudina and Dina Requena and I used to go along with Doña Patricia to the dances.

I got married at the young age of 18 to Alberto or, as people knew him as “el Wero”. He is no longer with us as he died on the 10th of April 2004. Out of our marriage came 10 children, 4 boys and 6 girls they are Isau, Alex, Amed, Luis, Mita, Chita, Oly, Priscilla, Ileana and Glenda. My husband was a farmer and I used to work at home, making tortillas, washing clothes etc.

I now live with my 2 grand children.



Mrs. Elena Mendez Ayala
April 15th, 2008

I was born in November 1922 in Benque Viejo, in the house where Maria Guerra lives now in Church Street. That's where my father Felix Mendez, my mother Felicia and I used to live. It was my uncle Chush, my father, my uncle Leandro, my uncle Leopoldo, my uncle Agustin, my aunt Cruz, my aunt Carmen and my Aunt Da.

I can always remember that Benque consisted of houses made out of "guano" and as children we all had to go look for water and firewood. We used to go to school; we went in at 9:00 am and came out at 12:00pm in time for lunch, went back in at 1:00pm and came out at 3:00pm. Back then the nuns had to go from house to house telling the parents of the children that they had to send their children to school, but now parents just send them. I started going to school at the age of 6 and by the age of 14 I was out of school. During all those years I only had one bag, the same bag I went in with was the same bag I finished school with, because my mom never bought me a bag.

I came out of school when I was in standard VI, I loved going to school and I was really smart too, but my mom used to send me to school a little later because I had to get some of my errands done before I could go to school. In that time they used to give us compositions that we had to learn, and because I wanted to pass I went to mass and I asked them to please give me the composition I knew the best so I could pass. The day of the grading of the composition came, I remember my mom bathed me and dressed me up in the best dress I had, and I used to think to myself that she never gave me a notebook to write in for school. I sat in the first bench ready for the composition, the Examiner gave out the sheets and when I saw mine it was "The Farm". I was so happy because I knew that composition by heart, I knew every full stop, every capital letter and coma. My mom didn't give me any notebook, but the nuns gave me paper to write

on, so I passed the composition writing. I remember I used to study it from the chalkboard, until I learned it well. The composition went something like this, "My Uncle Tom has a farm. One day I went to see him. His many cows were out on the grass....." and I can't remember the rest.

I had 5 siblings, we were 6 in all, they were Emerita, Palmira, Teresita, Maria Adela and my only brother Eduardo who died of a sickness we call "tosferina". I never got that sickness maybe because my mother used to give me "Extractomalta" and maybe because of that I rarely got used to get sick. I always go to check ups to see if everything is ok with me, my heart is ok, my lungs are ok and now I'm getting a pension from the social security which helps me out a lot.

I had a first cousin named Da. When Da was small, I used to sing for him until he fell asleep, I used to take care of him and I remember he smiled when I sang for him, and at the same time I used to take care of my little sister. Before he died she told me he was going to die, but I didn't feel scared, I didn't know the meaning of fear.

I used to help out my neighbour as well. I used to like going to processions a lot but, nowadays I can't really go because of my legs and veins, they hurt me a lot, and I have to lay down until the pain subsides.

I got married in 1940 and that's when I became Mendez de Ayala. I met my husband at a dance and I always used to tell him that I used to dance with him because he was a great dancer. He always knew how to move to the different songs that played at the dances. He used to be a Milpero and we got married when I was 17 years of age, and before I was 19 years I had my daughter, Algeria Magaña, who is now 66 years of age. I have 3 grand children, Alvarito, Landi and Orlina and I also have 4 great grand children. I live by myself and only Landi is the one that comes around on Fridays.



Elvira Duarte

March 5th, 2008

I'm 73 years old and born in the November 1934.

During my childhood I can remember that as there wasn't any high school so I could only finish primary school. However there was a club called the "Pioneer Club" whose president was Jesus Bedran and she taught art. It was here that I learned how to make, slippers, belts, and little "sombreritos", all made out of straw. As I didn't have anywhere to go I found the idea of making things out of straw really appealing.

After some time had passed an American by the name of Kendrick Johnson who we learned was an extension officer from Washington who was here in Belize to set up a 4H organization. He approached me and asked me if I wanted to be a part of it and I accepted. He taught me the pledge and I learned how to say it. He held a meeting with the other 4H members and he asked me to say the pledge in front of them, so I stood up and I did it. I took a seat and he asked me if he could have a word with me after the meeting. I was with Wilma, one of my friends, and he asked me if I would be interested in going to study abroad. I told him that I would consult with my mother and father, because the fact that I was 21 years old didn't mean that I could make decisions on my own, or so it seemed at that time. I asked my mother and she said that it would be a really good experience for me and that it was a great opportunity, but when I asked my father his answer was the opposite. My father told me that I could go only if Wilma went with me. I went back to Mr. Kendrick and I told him that I was really interested in the idea but that I didn't want to go alone, so I asked him if Wilma could come with me. He said no because only one could go. He asked Wilma if she was willing to go and she said yes but only if I went with her.

A few weeks later he told us that he had arranged for both of us to study abroad so we immediately took out our passports because we already had our plane tickets.

We left Belize, the two of us as we wanted it to happen. We were in Washington for 5 months, where I got a good pay of 13 dollars a day and 9 dollars when I was out of the district. I never used to spend the money and I only had to pay 4 dollars a day for my room which included food as well. I came back to Belize with \$2000.00, which at that time was a lot of money.

I continued my studies in manual arts by knitting little caps, sweaters and socks all without consulting a book. I also took a course where I learned how to vaccinate a chicken. We practiced on an orange at first but when it came time to vaccinate a real chicken, I was more afraid than excited. I also learned different sicknesses and symptoms of chickens. I moved on to working with calves, which was also a good experience for me.

When I came back to Belize my father was really happy that I was back. I built a house with the money I brought back and to this day I'm still living in it. When I tell my daughters that I myself built this house with the money I made over at the United States, they get surprised because I didn't spend the money on other things, which were cheaper over there. I wanted to get a lot, far from where I live now, but my uncle who was my mother's twin, told me that I didn't have to purchase a lot, because he was going to give me a lot, which at that time had cost him only \$280.00. When he died he left me the piece of land as he told me he would, but he told me that I should split it in half and give it to my daughter Bilita, so that when I get older she takes care of me.

After I returned to Belize I got a job working at the Ministry of Social Services. During this time I was transferred to Corozal. I worked there for 7 years and that 's where Bilita and Lupita were born. I resigned due to the fact that they wouldn't transfer me.

We moved back to Benque with my husband. We sold a car that I had bought at Corozal to "pachuco", a man from Benque and with the money we established a shop at Benque. I stopped working and dedicated myself to being a housewife, taking care of my daughters. I really couldn't complain with the house work as my husband paid different women to help me, women like Dona Anita, Mercedes, Domitila Miranda and Camila Flores.

Five years passed since we had moved back to Benque, and one dreadful day my husband passed away. It was very difficult for me to continue with the business because I was caring for my 3 daughters. My youngest daughter was 9 months, Lupita was 3 years old and my eldest Bilita was 6 years old. I had to work. I had to see how I could make money, so I worked at my house doing whatever I could to be able to give my girls a good life. I used to sew, perm hair, iron clothes and do whatever I could find to be able to make some money.

Time passed and I got to know of a job in Cayo, San Ignacio, which was the same kind of job that I used to do at the Social Services at Corozal, so they told me I needed no training for it. I worked in San Ignacio for 13 years along with Mr. Tapia. He eventually resigned because he got into politics and was running for elections. He didn't win and he lost his job. I felt sorry because I know how it feels to be jobless. I always tell my daughters that I have God to thank that there was a job vacancy at San Ignacio.

I stopped working in San Ignacio at the age of 67. I retired and they gave me my pension money. Some of the money I invested in my house and I also saved some of the money at the credit union. I started to think about flash floods which occurred mostly during the hurricane seasons and remembering my mother saying that when the river was flooded that it reached to the street side.

People always tell me that I should rest more but I can't because I'm a really active person. I always tell them I have no owner and that I work till I drop and that I'll stop when I drop, I always like to keep moving forward doing laundry and ironing. My only sicknesses are body aches and my blood pressure which I control with captulima.

Well that was my life back then, I am currently involved with a group called "la Legion de Maria" in the HelpAge. I love helping people and it doesn't matter who they are, if they come to me for help and I can help them I will. We help them through the HelpAge with pampers, medicines such as pills etc, ice, volateren and the list goes on. We help a lot of senile people in our community. At present my daughter Bilita is the President of the group and right now we are expecting a machine to take blood pressure and one for anaemia. It's a wonderful experience to work with the group and be able to help people. I'm also in charge of the 'pastores'. I was encouraged to do it by my aunt Meches, whom Mrs. Oralia left in charge, because she did not want the tradition to stop.



Francisco Contreras

February 19th, 2008

My name is Francisco Contreras and I'm 85 years old. I was born in December 1922, my mother's name is Francisca Contreras and my father's name was Ciriaco Contreras. I had 5 siblings Lupita, Elvira, Maria, Ciriaco and Braulia. I lived on the 3rd street in Benque Viejo with my grandparents Elias Contreras and Braulia Contreras.

I remember I started going to school at the age of seven because my uncle, who was a pharmacist, put me in school. At that time the school's name was Saint Joseph School and I finished school when I reached standard VI at the age of thirteen. The studies weren't as advanced as today. We had nuns teaching in the schools and they used to come from Germany. The priests used to come from Texas and other places. There weren't a lot of books for the children to study and all we took to school was a pen with the ink bottle, a pencil, a book and your bag, which was made out of the flour bags.

I believe that there are evil spirits because when I was about the age of six I woke up to go to the bathroom and through an opening in the door I could see the bright moon. While I was going to the bathroom I saw a lady in a white dress. I went back to my hammock and while I was laying down two hands came through the door and grabbed me and elevated me off my hammock and when I felt that I turned over and jumped down, got up and ran to my dad, who asked me what was wrong. I told my father that a lady was taking me and he told me that it was the Ixtabai. The next day I went to the kitchen where my aunt was I went to have a drink of water when all of a sudden I lost all control and fell to the ground. I fainted and my aunt went to get my mother while my father tried to bring me back.

By the time I turned eighteen I was already a "Milpero", but used to do all kinds of jobs including working in Guatemala in the construction of runways. I worked there

until I was twenty years of age. I saved money and came back to Benque and used the money to build my mother a house, the same house in which I still live in today. The house was built in 1948, and only my mother and my other siblings lived with us.

I got married on April 12th 1953, at the age of thirty to Maria Iglesias who was twenty years of age. I was ten years older than my wife. I met her at a dance and we became friends. We went out for four years and we have been married for fifty-five years now. We had eight children, five girls and three boys; Caremencita, Miriam, Eddy, Melvin, Angelita, Manuel, Sonia and Carol.

Time passed by and the children grew and the family grew as well. I now have twenty six grandchildren, and three great grand children. After I stopped working at the chicle at the age of forty five I started working at the sugar cane fields and at the Milpa.

In that time there were jobs, but the most popular one was the chicle. Most young men looked for jobs because it was the only way that they and their family could survive. My dad died when I was thirteen years old and that's when I started going to the chicle. Everyone worked and people were more peaceful back then. Back then the pay of a man was very low and was about \$3.00 to \$6.00 a day, but everything was cheaper and people used to come from other countries and sell things that were a lot more cheaper. In that time the only thing that we used to purchase was the salt and the flour. We grew rice and corn and sugar. The oil was taken out from the "corozo", and the sugar was made into panela using the sugar cane. We didn't have any electricity back then and things were not as advanced as they are today.

Well now I keep on working as a farmer in my own farm. I harvest vegetables and fruits, some of them I have for sale and some for my family.



Julia Perez

March 19th, 2008

My father's name was Demetrio Cambranes and my mother's name was Carmita Aguillo. I had 2 brothers Carmen and Demetrio Jr. and 1 sister Sixta. I was the youngest and was born here in Benque Viejo, and grew up in a thatch house but I have Guatemalan blood.

Sixta got married to Leopoldo Mendez and they had 2 children, Carmita and Blanca. Carmen got married to Dorothy and they had 2 girls. Demetrio got married to Lola Matus and had three boys and four girls

I was around the age of ten when my father took me out of school, because we went to live in a town in Guatemala. My mother died one year later when I was eleven years old and she was buried in Melchor. My father re-married two years later and went to live to Melchor. When he came back to Benque he was blind and so went to live with Sixta. I used to go take him food every day. He died at the age of 83.

When I was fourteen years old my grand father used to take me to dances, the dances were all with Marimba at that time. I used to wear long dresses so that the men couldn't see our legs and we also used to wear long stockings. The nights were illuminated only by the lamps called "faroles". The nights were sometimes really bright because of the moon. There were many places in Benque where dances were held and there was competition between them. That is where I met my husband at one of those dances. I had a lot of men that liked me, like Rogelio Mendez, Manuel Castellanos , Felipe Morales , Antonio Puc and Timo Godoy who all used to visit me. My father liked Timo but I didn't because he used to visit more girls. He had a lot of friends like, Elena Méndez, Lola A, Zenaida, Tila, Juana Ileana, Tuo Moh, Dorita Ayala, and Linda Guerra. A lot of them have passed away but I'm still here living.

At that time “posadas” were lively and celebrated with marimba dances. People used to give out horchata and candy and even the young men used to come from Cayo.

I got married in the year 1938 to Francisco Perez and my brother Demetrio lived with us for six years. We had twelve children but one died when she was just two years old so we were left with eleven. Raquel, Valdemar, Gilberto, Rafael, Julio, Ismael, Adelita, Lucy, Areli, Noemí and Thelma. We worked so hard to be able to give them a proper education but I was only successful with four of them. Gilberto is now an engineer, Rafael is a pilot, Julio is good with computers and Ismael is a lawyer. I am so proud of my children as I always tried to give them all I could and I don't regret doing so as I used to work so hard. I was a housewife and I dedicated myself to them. I also used to do a lot of sewing, bake bread to sell and make longanisa, but it was mostly sewing I did. There were times that I had to make up to 60 shirts for the police officers and at that time they paid us \$1.25 per shirt.

My children were all so smart and they themselves made me push them forward. My children that studied in Belize suffered a lot but they still pulled through. Valdemar is a really good taxi driver at the Princess Hotel and he's making good money. Raquel is a really good barber and a good musician and, thanks to God, they all live well. Three of my daughters are in U.S.A.; they are Lucy, Thelma and Areli. I had my grandchildren Juanita and Lorena living with me for four years because their mother had gone to the U.S. to work. When I took them one was thirteen and the other was nine. I now have three great grand children

Recently I was really bad with my heart and I was taken to Guatemala for treatment.



Julio C. Alvarado

April 8, 2008

I was born in the year 1922 in the republic of El Salvador, in a department of “La Paz”, in a small town called Santa Maria Ostuma. When I was five years old my mother’s grandmother died and we moved to San Salvador and that’s where I grew up. I started going to this school called “La escuelita del padre diez” . The father Diez founded that school for the poor children. I completed until fourth grade and I can remember the teachers being Jesuits and nuns. They started building a seminary and father Diez advised me that I should attend the preparatory. It wasn’t a big place and they taught fifth and sixth year. Father Diez preferred to be in a class teaching than preaching in a church and I believe that that is why the education here in Belize is so high because they are so dedicated to what they do. For example “san Juan” is in hands of Jesuits, and Palotti is in the hands of the Palatine nuns so I guess that is why Belize enjoys that privilege.

I came here to Benque when I was about thirty-two years old and it was still a British colony and Belize had the name of British Honduras. It was a small town with only about 2,000 people and there was bush everywhere. I used to live in front of Mr. Crispin’s Pasture. When I got this house it was a thatch house and it was the last house around this area. After my house there was bush everywhere. The police station was where the house of culture was and it was also the last building around this area. The schools were small. I remember that I helped build the big school in the year 1963. The Palatine nuns came to Benque Viejo by the river in the year 1913 and they lived in the convent which was at that time the old WASA building, later moving on to where BRC is today.

I worked with the Guatemalan government as a construction teacher at the federal school for three years. In 1954 there was a change in government and I decided to stop working and came back to Benque. After that one of my friends wrote a letter to the colonial secretary and eight days later he responded and he gave us the permission to bring my family through them. It wasn’t until the 15th of October that I could get my family here to Benque from Flores.

I met a brother-in-law to Rafael Guerra and we decided to go to Corozal to work together. When I was there I met father Soti and I knew how to talk to father Soti because

he was a Jesuit and I could still speak a little Latin. I spoke to him in Latin and he hired me to work for him. I worked at the Mission building churches and schools all over the district after the hurricane had hit Corozal. Later I went to build the school in Bullet Tree and Succotz and after father Soti returned to Benque I helped to fix up the church.

Later on, Father Soti left and I became a cabinet maker and I got into the carpentry business. I can also draw plans for houses. Everything I can do I learned in El Salvador. I studied drawing at night and that is how I could make the plans for the tall buildings in Belmopan. I worked there for three years. After that I went to Belize City and worked on the reconstruction of Brodies. I then started building houses I build a house for Mr.S. Shoman, and Mr. Silvestre, who was a Minister at that time. It took me about a year and seven months to finish the house. I worked a lot here in Benque making cabinets and other furniture for people here in Benque. I worked at this factory where we built furniture that was exported to Miami.

When the hurricane Hattie passed over Belize I was working with the Palatine nuns and had already bought my house. The kitchen collapsed and my pregnant wife had to take refuge at the police station along with my other 3 children. I used to send money for my wife on the bus because I couldn't come weekly and she used to get the money through Carmita Mendez. I used to make about \$18.00 dollars a week and that used to provide for everything. Now people are making a lot more money and everything is expensive. I loved Benque because there were a lot of people that were of Guatemalan descent.

We had ten children with my wife but only seven survived. From those seven children I have twenty six grand children and 18 great grand children.

I participate in many events in Benque and very often get invited to perform because I can play the harmonic and the flute. I can play the National Anthem of El Salvador, France, England, Cuba, Costa Rica, Honduras, Mexico, Guatemala and Belize. My family loved music and that is why I'm into music as well. I read the bible everyday because it gives me knowledge and I also write poems. My poems have been published many times in different papers and places for example, here in Belize by the Belize times, in Mexico by the XEWU and "La Hora" in Guatemala. I like going to different places and observing the people. When I come back they inspire me to write and also when I'm having a conversation with someone and they say something that really catches my attention I write it down. My poems used to be recited at Radio Mopan in Melchor. I tried printing a book of poems but it was too expensive to do so. The only problem with me is that I can't remember my poems; I only remember the ones from other poets. One of his poems is:

El Caer de la Tarde

Inspirado en las alturas del Cerro del Carmen en una tranquila tarde de Otoño.

Desde lo alto, Cerro del Carmen se va bandear una serpentina de verdes Montañas; que rodea el majestuoso valle de nuestra Comunidad, El Carmen. Se contempla al lado, el testimonio de los siglos, XUNANTUNICH como un recuerdo que nos brinda la belleza de pasado, de su sabiduría, de esplendor.

Al caer la tarde, el astro rey, se esconde al pie de la montaña, cediéndonos los últimos destellos de la soleada tarde, invitándonos al descanso de la noche, salpicada de titilas y las estrellas del firmamento.

Desde lo alto, en el valle, todo es belleza. El manto azul se tiende como una nube, haciendo mas hermoso el paisaje de una noche de verano. El valle, nuestro hogar, se cubre de lentejuelas. Las luces aparecen una a una con el titilar de alegres armonías.

Cerro el Carmen es tranquilo,
Sólo se escuchan las melodias del pasado.

Mientras contemplamos la belleza de las Luces del Valle; una música romántica invade el recuerdo, de nuestro pasado. Al caer la tarde el Astro Rey, nos dedica sus últimos destellos, invitándonos al descanso de la noche.

Desde lo alto, Cerro del Carmen se vive al presente, se contempla el pasado y; podemos ver el futuro. Allá a lo lejos, escuchamos los Ecos del Mopan.

Con diminutas cascadas, nos de la alegre melodía, del: Cantar de los Cantares.

Al caer la tarde, entramos a un mundo de tranquilidad, que solo supera el recuerdo de una vieja melodía; mientras en el valle, el titilar armonioso de sus sicodelas luces, contrastan en armonía, con las estrellas de firmamento, invitándonos al descanso, después de:
Un agitado día laborioso.

Benque Viejo del Carmen
18/02/95



Ofelia Castellanos de Lima

April 15th, 2008

I was born in May 1926; I will be eighty-two years of age. My parents were Guatemalan; therefore I am of Guatemalan descent. My father's name is Francisco Castellanos and my mother's name is Martina Corso. In all there were eight of us, five boys and three girls. I am the youngest one out of all of them and I was born here in Benque Viejo.

When I was young I attended Mount Carmel Primary School, with the Palatine nuns, who were my teachers. They were really strict with the children, and perhaps that is the reason why we learned more. I learned all my time tables, and if we didn't do our homework they would hit us with ropes, which in a way made us more responsible and we did our homework. I went to school until I was fourteen years old; I loved school so much I didn't want to come out, that the nuns asked me if I wanted to become a student teacher. They weren't giving any classes and in the month of May they were going to be having exams at Cayo, and that's where I got the title of 1st year pupil teacher, 2nd year pupil teacher, 3rd year pupil teacher and finally the title of FIRST CLASS. That's where I studied all those years and I started teaching at the age of 15. I taught in Mount Carmel school for about thirteen years, I stopped teaching at the age of twenty-eight because I was going to get married.

My husband's name was Angel Lima, and he was from Veracruz, Mexico. He was a chiclero who was working at Flores and then came to Benque, and that's how I met him. We got married and we had six children together, two boys and four girls. They were Hugo, Guadalupe, Ruth, Yolanda, Joyce and Rafael, all of them being Belizean. Time passed by and well, I found the need to go back to school, so I went back into teaching and taught for another 10 years.

After teaching for so long I retired, I went to the states because I had to see how I gave my children their education. Five of my children studied at Palotti and technical in Belize and one of them studied in San Ignacio.

I remember that Christmas was a really happy time back then, there so many dances and parties. We used to take the children to the Christmas celebrations, where we danced to Marimba, and they gave us candy. All of the dances were with Marimba and we all enjoyed them so much, especially on Christmas.

On April 9th, 2008 I was invited to the University of Belize, to recite some of my verses, for which they gave me a certificate. This event was part of “La voz de Belice 1”. I was invited and interviewed by the Giovanni Pinelo. There were so many persons at the event; they all started to recite their verses and poems.

The purpose of the event was to promote literature in Belize. My father used to write down everything important that used to happen, for example an eclipse, war etc. I followed in his footsteps; I document things like, the eclipses, Graduations, when they built the Boulevard here in Benque, when the convent was blessed, when they installed the electrical plant, when hail fell on a Good Friday, when the pope came to Belize and many other events.

These are some of my Verses:

Con pluma de Colibrí
Y la tinta de Zafiro
Calentándole un suspiro
En una rosa escribió.
Te adoro y te hede adorar
Mi pecho amor te atributa
Será mi templo tu gruta
Y tus pies serán mi altar.

Las horas que tiene el día
Las he repartido así
Nueve soñado con tigo
Y quince pensando en ti.

El amor hade ser uno
Eso bien lo sabes vos
No tiene amor con ninguno
La mujer que quiere a dos.



Sarita Pacheco

April 15th, 2008

I am ninety-seven years old, I was born in September 1910. I was born here in Benque Viejo and my father and mother were from Guatemala. My father's name was Francisco Caste llanos and my mother's name was Martina Corso. My parents had eight children together, three of which were born at San Francisco, Guatemala, and the others were born here in Benque Viejo. It was eight of us, and now only Ofelia and I are living. I was baptized, did my first holy communion, my confirmation, and got married here in Benque Viejo. My godmother was Mrs. Valeriana, I used to live where Betty lives now, that's where my father used to have his house, it was a thatch house made out of sticks, and to give it support people used to mix soil with grass and plaster it on the house, after that was done they used to pass "cal" on top of it. There wasn't any lumber or zinc at that time, and that's why people used to do that. They used to bring things from Belize, they used to bring "sal de Queso" it was such a good cheese.

I didn't really have a good life when I was young because i used to suffer from a lot of pain. I went to school but I didn't learn any English because the nuns were from Germany, and my sickness prevented me from learning. I used to suffer from this pain, which I acquired playing on the street with my sister one day, and ever since that pain never left me. We started going to school at the age of six and stopped at the age of twelve. All of my school friends have already passed.

My husband was Guatemalan and he was from Flores Peten, his name was Francisco Pacheco. They used to call his mother "maestra Excelsia". I met him here in Benque Viejo as he was friends with my brothers. I got married when I was nineteen years old. He was a good man, we got married in the year 1929, and one year later we had Chocha. After that Herculano, Maria Oralia, Ismael (+) he died when he was seven, Martita (+) she died when she was three, chito (+) his death was the one I felt the most

because he died when he was already of age, then it was Rafael, Ismael, and Raul. Then after that two more girls died because the doctors didn't attend me in time, and how I was really thin I think my body couldn't take it no more. The doctors only attended the rich women, but the good thing about having many kids is that you get grand children, and they take care of me by taking me to the doctor when I am sick. I have fifty great grand children, thirty grand children and three great- great- grandchildren.

I am now suffering from this cough which doesn't leave my body because I don't take any medicine for it. I remember my old house, I remember it very well, I remember it being really clean, and I also used to live where Yano's store is now. The month of May was a very beautiful month; we used to have parties and dance to Marimba at church. No one thought in anything bad and the men used to go pick flowers which were the "Flor de Mayo". We were all ready around eleven a.m. for the parties, the parties were held at the house in which they had picked for the party to be held. It was like a procession with palms and marimba. When it was time for posadas the young ladies used to dance 2 dances and then they used to give out candy, then they started dancing again. We used to go dance to Club Victoria, our mothers used to take us and they used to take really good care of us. Being young, back then was a beautiful thing, you never got any complains from the young men and young women got married at a young age. They told us we would suffer from poverty, and sicknesses etc. But we didn't care about being poor because everyone was poor at that time.

Everything was so cheap back then and you could do a lot with one dollar, one dollar was enough to buy your rice, flour and beans. We used to use ashes to wash clothes before because we didn't have any detergents, we used to put ashes in the water and waited until it settled to the bottom and used the clear water on top. We also used to go to the river and wash as well. We used to buy \$0.10 of cheese and they used to give us a big piece. I used to make my own lard out of corozo and used to fill up jars of lard. That was my life and I am still here struggling so that I can live more years.



Francisco Trinidad Méndez

March 2nd, 2008

I was born in Benque Viejo Del Carmen in June 1936. My mothers name was Sixta Cambranes and my fathers name was Leopoldo Mendez.

I went to school where the old convent was. This was situated where the government house is now, in between the deacon's house and the primary school. There was a division of the building that was made out of zinc and that was standard four, five and six. In each class there were about 15 students and they all used to form a straight line to go into class. There were about six teachers and all of them were nuns.

Later on Mrs. Ofelia Lima became a teacher and so did Mela Castellanos and Tia Mita. Tia Mita started teaching around the young age of 14. She taught for around 4 years and she didn't even have a degree, all she had was training from the nuns.

When I was small, around standard 1, I was taken to the "chicle", but I didn't know anything and I used to copy. I then moved on to standard II and III, then IV then V. Unfortunately I couldn't finish standard VI because I was already fourteen years old, and they didn't want any fourteen year old boys after they turned that age. I came out of school and I went to my father's farm where he had about 10-15 horses and a herd of cattle. The farm was close to Melchor and he left me in charge of it whenever he went to the "chicle".

After some years we made a "milpa" that extended itself almost to the neighbouring village of Arenal. My father bought me a horse which helped me to carry firewood to sell in Benque. I used to make a dollar out of all the firewood I brought to

Benque to sell. In that time it was a lot of money and you could buy so much things with a dollar simply because everything was so cheap. The pound of sugar cost six cents and so did the pound of flour, a tin of milk cost six cents. Everything was cheaper back then. Everyone used to eat with corn tortilla so corn was found in every household.

For a year I continued selling firewood and I would tell my sisters Mita and Blanca to go deliver it in a wheelbarrow. I used to save up all my money in this box I had. A year later when I was 15 years old and my father had stopped being a “chiclero” and he dedicated his time to raising cows and mules. I stopped with the firewood business and he took me to the bush and that became my second job.

My grandfather got more cattle and he dedicated himself fully to his farm. A white man, or “gringo” as well called him, came and taught us how to turn the soil using mules in an area of about the size of a football field or a little bigger. We bought 10 ‘quintal’ of corn and planted it. We also planted peanuts and beans all in the same place. After we used to reap all the corn, peanuts and beans, I would turn the soil again with the help of the mule. Time passed and I was about 18 years old when I left the farm and started working at my third Job, which was in Melchor, mixing cement because they were building the hospital.

I got married at the age of 23 to Annette Jane Mendez and we had 8 children: Miriam, Rosita, Kendall, Ana Doris, Trinidad, Leopoldo, Esperanza y Carmencita. I met Annette at the dances at the club Victoria. At that time Benque was smaller and it only reached from St. Joseph Street to the Abel Silva’s areas, and on the opposite to the Hattievillie’s areas. Everyone knew each other and from there Benque started growing and growing.

After I got married I continue working at the chicle and with the mules but because I already had 5 children my father found me a job working at this lumber yard for the Espat’s. The lumber yard was close to Melchor and I used to make \$2.00 a day and \$12.00 a week. I already had five kids and my father used to help me raising the children as well with help from the farm. Then they got a machine for lumber which was used to make floorings, sidings etc. The only problem was that no one could use it except for this man from Cayo by the name of Dilling and he knew how to use the machine really good. He asked me if I wanted to learn and I said yes but he was really strict and told me that if I was going to do this job I had to pay keen attention to what I was doing and I couldn’t be getting distracted by passing people. He told me I had to pay attention to what I was doing because if I didn’t I could get really hurt. I learned how to smooth out the lumber and when he saw that I could do it really well he told me that I would get paid 3 dollars and all the rest would get paid 2 dollars. I was happy because I was going to be making 18 dollars a week, which made me feel so much better.

When Mr. Dilling saw that I got really good at it he came only half a week and raised my pay to four dollars. He then stopped working and left me the job completely and my pay went up another dollar so I was being paid 5 dollars now. After some time passed the government took the machine and so I went to work at Melchor where I was

paid 4 quetzales a day. At the time it was 2 Belizean to one quetzal but today it's the other way around.

I continued working and I saved up my money so that I could establish a business selling chicken and fish. I bought my first car which was a Volkswagen van. I told my wife's father to teach me how to drive standard and he did. I went to get my license with this sergeant and I had to go through so many tests so that I could be able to get a licence, but the sergeant said that I had passed with a 100%.

Benque was now growing and the Hattieville area started to get more populated. I started the meat business but I couldn't have a lot of meat due to the fact that there was no electricity all through the night which was not good for storing meat. This man from Cayo came to Benque and he told me to trade my van with his car and I didn't think twice in doing so I traded it and started to taxi.

After that I started the business of buying and selling pints to the Bowen factory and up until now I keep on doing that business.

N.B. Mr. Mendez died on the 30th of March 2008.