

Memories & Soot

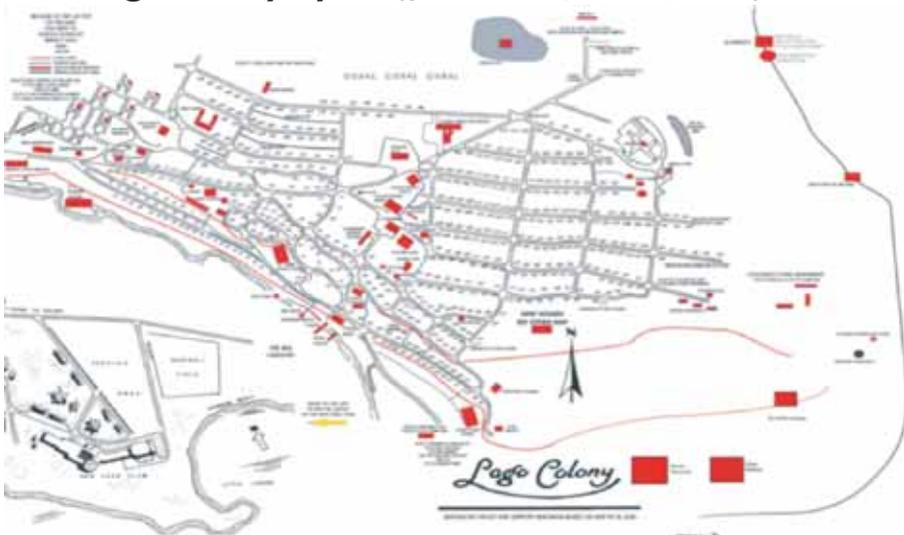
The history of the Lago Colony in San Nicolas

Many know or have heard of the semi-ghost town at almost the very end of our beautiful island. If you take a close look and use a bit of imagination, you can still see a bunch of youngsters playing baseball on the deserted field, ladies chatting during their morning tennis appointment or people attending the Sunday Mass. There seems so much to tell about this once magnificent community, where the emerald green views of nature and tantalizing blue ocean are still breathtaking. Mr. Dan Jensen, who grew up in the colony, was kind enough to share part of its history.

The layout of the colony and its development.

In 1924 San Nicholas harbor was used for transshipment of crude oil from Lake Maracaibo to the United States by Lago Oil and Transport Company Ltd. The ships used to transport the crude oil were lake tankers because they were shallow draft tankers that could enter the lake. These tankers were manned by English officers, most of them from Ireland. The first houses built in what later became the Colony were built for the families of these English officers. These houses were built near the piers, in the area that is now the refinery. In 1928 when the refinery was constructed by the then American Lago Oil and Transport Company Ltd, Lago Colony was expanded. One of the first things they did was to move the houses further east and the houses numbered 24 to 36 were these original houses.

Lago Colony layout (pics courtesy of Dan Jensen)



At the time, 1924, Venezuela was ruled by a dictator, Juan Vicente Gómez, nicknamed Tyrant of The Andes, and both Shell and Esso (Lago) did not want to invest anymore money in the country than was necessary. They also had to transship the oil because large ships could not get into Lake Maracaibo so they went to Curaçao (Shell) and Aruba (Esso) Lago. They realized it was better to refine the oil at the source than to transport the crude they built in the islands rather than invest in Venezuela. This changed after World War II and they began to invest in Venezuela and built refineries there.

Most oil companies at the time provided housing for the supervisory personnel, in the case of Lago it was Lago Colony and Lago Heights. The Eagle refinery, which was Shell and located in Oranjestad also provided housing for their supervisory personnel.

Some of these houses are still standing.

Originally, the houses in Lago Colony were for “foreign staff employees on the New York Payroll”. The houses in Lago Heights were for “local supervisory personnel on the local payroll.” The Lago Heights and Lago Colony houses were not owned by the employees, they rented them from the company and when employment ended they had to move out. Later, in the case of Lago Colony, around 1985, these houses became the property of the Aruba Government and some were sold.

As the refinery grew and more employees were hired, more houses were



added. During World War II there was a housing shortage and only single men could go to work, no families could come. After the war the “New Houses” were built, the fifty or so concrete houses with the numbers in the 1500s. It is interesting to note that right after the war the Army barracks at Colorado Point were converted to apartments and used as family housing until the New Houses were completed. When the New Houses were completed the Army Barracks, which were made of wood, were removed. Some of the concrete slabs are still there. Then in 1960 Sea View Apartments were built on the south side of the road to Colorado Point. These were two and three bedroom apartments built with four units to a block and there were about 10 blocks or 40 apartments. Then in the early 1960s Lago began to “downsize and automate” and as foreign staff were laid off, houses were torn down. Later Lago provided money for hourly, local employees to borrow to purchase houses built in Essoville. The houses in Essoville were owned by local employees, not by Lago although the loans were backed by Lago.

Life at the colony

When Lago first started the people of Aruba were very happy, there was only the growing of aloe and fishing as a means to make a living. This was a new industry that would bring jobs. The Lago Colony remained a segregated community long after integration came about in the United States. This goes back to the period and conditions in the United States. Segregation was the norm in most of the U.S. until the late 1960s. In the south it was very strong; in the north it was there but not as strong as the south. Looking back I can see that Lago Colony was a segregated community. I did not even think about this when I was growing up.

As for life in the colony, it was great. We had an American School, a movie theater, bowling alley, club house with soda fountain, beaches, sailing and life was easy. Everyone knew each other and all the kids played together as one big happy family.

It was not until the early 1970s that Lago allowed non-white supervisory employees to live in the Colony. There were cases of Dutchmen who were married to Aruban girls who were supervisors but not allowed to live in the colony until the 1970s.

After the colony was built and the fence built and the gate set up (Gate #6 at the sea grape grove) if you did not live in the colony you needed a pass to get in. Passes were issued to people who had friends living in the colony so they could visit, fisherman so they could come to fish, the fishing rights were never stopped and native fisherman always kept boats down by Rogers Beach and of course maids were allowed to come in to work. The hospital in colony was for all employees but it too was segregated, with a wing for the white employees and the rest was for the local employees. People could get a pass to the colony to visit relatives when they were in the hospital.



The Lone Palm Stadium

Some Famous stats:

Somewhere around 1934 Lago workers collected money for escapees from Devil's Island. Devil's Island is featured in the famous book Papillon by Henri Charrière, and was a French punitive colony island. In 1944 Mrs. Roosevelt visited Aruba, and very possibly the colony during an undisclosed trip to The Caribbean. In 1955 H.M. Queen Juliana and H.R.H. Prince Bernard visited Aruba and the Colony.

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The colony now & in the future:

The people who grew up in Lago Colony were very close and we still get together once a year some place in the U.S. Then every four years we get together in Aruba, the last time was 2004 with about 150 in attendance. There is a very fond spot in all our hearts for Aruba and we love Aruba, it was our home, many of them were born in Aruba, I went there when I was 3 weeks old in 1938 and left in 1957. I have been back about four times. I do not think you will find a more supportive group than the Colony Kids. Some, about four, have moved back and now live in Aruba. We find it sad to see our home (Lago Colony) as it is today but we also understand how it happened and why it happened.

Today not all the people of Aruba are happy with the Valero refinery. It employs around 750 people but it is an eye sore, a polluter and many people on the island would be happy if it were not there. If I were to predict the future I can see the refinery gone, the San Nicholas harbor made into a cruise ship port with berths for four or five cruise ships and the town of San Nicholas becoming a shopping area for the cruise ship passengers. If the resorts that are on the planning books for the area are built it will of course change the area. Such a plan would leave Palm Beach area for the long term (a week or more) tourist and the San Nicholas area for the day tourist. Such a plan would go a long way to ease congestion and help develop the entire island. It would however leave Aruba with only one industry and such a plan if it happens would be 20 to 30 years down the road.

Special Thanks to Mr. Dan Jensen, who was kind enough to participate in this interview, having growing up as an American in the Colony. Currently, he's the webmaster of www.logo-colony.com, a website dedicated entirely to Aruba and the colony.

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