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# Belize (British Honduras): Odd Man Out, a Geo-Political Dispute

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BELIZE (BRITISH HONDURAS): ODD MAN OUT

A GEO-POLITICAL DISPUTE

(TITLE)

BY

Gustave D. Damann

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

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## I. INTRODUCTION

To the casual observer glancing at a map of Central America, the country of Guatemala and the British colony of Belize (British Honduras) nestle together with little independent distinctiveness. However, to examine Belize's uniqueness of national character, the reader will be led chronologically through the various influxes of peoples into Belize.

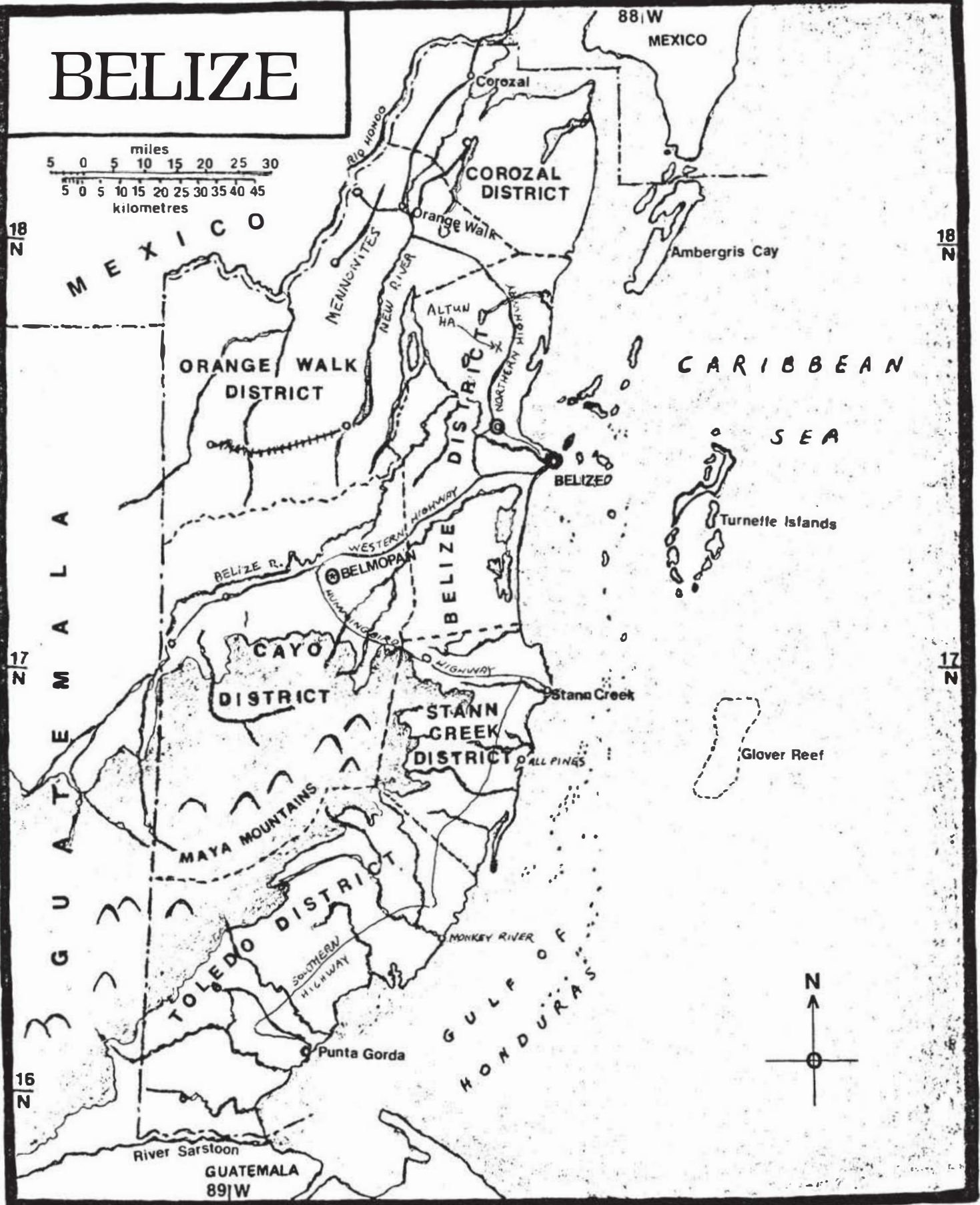
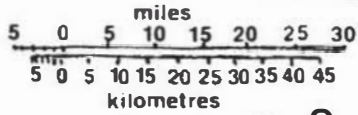
The differences and similarities of these peoples are extremely important because of a long standing geo-political question: Who owns Belize? To summarize the problem, under a treaty in 1859 with Guatemala, Great Britain acknowledged the coastal strip, which her loggers had occupied for hundreds of years, as her colony, naming it British Honduras. However, Great Britain failed to fulfill her treaty promise to connect the area to Guatemala City by road. Therefore, Guatemala, based on inherited Spanish claims, considers "Nuestra Belice" as its property. Mexico denies both claims and says the northern half of Belize belongs to her. To further complicate the question, inhabitants of Belize claim to desire independence from Great Britain whenever a reasonable expectation of self-determination is assured.

After visiting Guatemala and other Central American countries in the summer of 1966 the author's interests turned

toward Belize, perhaps the least known state in the Western Hemisphere. Numerous readings coupled with first hand observations on short visits to Belize during the summers of 1971 and 1975 will, the writer hopes, provide some insight into the region and show that the question of political control should not be determined by legal interpretations of yellowing treaties, but by the separating differences in the present day cultures of Guatemala and Belize which would make their union quite difficult.



# BELIZE



International Frontier ————

District Boundary - - - - -

Roads ————

Capital ————

International Airport ————

Land above 1,000 ft. ————

Fig. 1.



## II. YESTERDAY - PROGRESSION OF POPULATION SETTLEMENT

Although geography is primarily chorographical rather than chronological, by using a historical approach in this chapter one may then better understand the diversity of the present populations in Guatemala and Belize.

Oddly enough, the earliest recorded settlement, in what are today the two states under study, was very similar. This homogeneity of cultures can be observed at such sites as Tikal, Altun Ha, and Xunantunich. Altun Ha, a Mayan coastal center located thirty miles north of Belize City, dates from as early as 200 B.C. (See Fig. 2).

### The Mayan Beginnings

Before 1000 B.C., the Maya wandered into the forest of present day eastern Guatemala and western Belize. The Nahuas had been there before the Maya. Still other men preceded the Nahuas.<sup>1</sup> Yet the Maya stayed. The settlements grew until Mayadom occupied 125,000 square miles in Guatemala, Campache, Tabasco, Chiapas, Yucatan, Belize, Western Honduras, and part of El Salvador.<sup>2</sup>

A truly advanced culture appeared, begetting great cities with pyramids, palaces, and stone stelae. Arts and the sciences flourished. The Maya had ideographic writing, religious hierarchy, astronomy, road networks, private property, ceramics, jade carving, painting, and textiles. A number system with the concept

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<sup>1</sup>Thorsten V. Kalijarvi, Central America: Land of Lords and Lizards (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Co. Inc., 1962), p. 35.

<sup>2</sup>Victor W. Von Hagen, World of the Maya (New York: The New American Library, 1960), p. 25.



Fig. 2 Altun Ha, an ancient Mayan coastal center.

of zero was also invented by the Mayans.<sup>3</sup> Recent evidence even points toward Mayan contact with Southeast Asia.

Yet the Maya did not have the wheel, metals, nor draft animals other than themselves. The soil and climate allowed maize and cacao to be easily grown, thus giving freedom of specialization to those tribal members not needed in the fields. The Mayan civilization's zenith lasted from the fourth to the seventh century and then began to decline. Various causes have been advanced trying to explain the disintegration including: exhaustion of water supplies, disease, war, and soil exhaustion.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the cause or causes, the writer's opinion is a combination of all of the above, this civilization had dissolved at least five centuries before the entrance of Europeans into Central America on any noticeable scale.

### European Intrusion

#### Spanish Contact

In 1502, Columbus on his fourth and last voyage landed on one of the Bay Islands in the Gulf of Honduras. Later, weathering a hurricane, he offered "Thanks to God" (Gracias a Dios) from the perils of "the Deep" (Las Fonduras). A corruption to Honduras was applied to the Gulf and its adjoining shores.<sup>5</sup>

Two Spanish navigators, Vincente Yancy Pinzon and Juan Diaz de Solis, sailed northward along the coasts of present day British Honduras in 1506, but made no attempt to land. A Spaniard

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<sup>3</sup>Kalijarvi, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup>Kalijarvi, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup>Stephen L. Caiger, British Honduras: Past and Present (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1951), p. 17.

also seems to be the first European to enter the area from the interior. In 1503, Don Pedro de Alvarado invaded the highlands of Guatemala and eventually defeated the Cakchiquels. Hernando Cortes, in 1524, marched from Vera Cruz to Truxillo to put down a rebellion in Spanish Honduras. One of Cortes' captains, Bernal Diaz de Castillo, crossed the Cockscomb Range near the Mayan ruins of Lubaantun.<sup>6</sup> Because the Spaniards preferred the more comfortable highland climates, they ignored the hot humid eastern lowland almost totally.

The Spanish in fact had been the sole possessors of the western hemisphere beyond a longitude line running 300 miles west of the Azores for in 1493, Pope Alexander VI with the Divine Right of the Papal Donation, gave the above mentioned area to their Most Catholic Majesties Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain.<sup>7</sup> How then did the British get into British Honduras ?

In 1587, Protestant Queen Elizabeth declared the Papal Donation of 1493 invalid and stated that it would be quite proper for her or anyone's subjects to trade and settle in lands not already inhabited by the Spanish.<sup>8</sup>

Drake and Hawkins had been carrying on the privateering trade in the Caribbean for some years previous. With the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the way lay open - the monopoly was broken.

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<sup>6</sup>Caiger, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup>Caiger, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup>Caiger, p. 20.



### The English Baymen Arrive

In 1617, Petter Wallace, a pirate, ex-governor of Tortuga, and former lieutenant of Sir Walter Raleigh, seeking refuge from the Spaniards, sailed into the mouth of the Belize River. His name "Wallace" survives as "Belize" today. The Spaniards pronounced the "W" as "B", and thus corrupted Wallace into Balis or Belize.<sup>9</sup> Around 1640, Wallace returned with 80 buccaneers and constructed the first European settlement in present day Belize. Earlier settlements of logwood cutters seem to have taken place along the Cay of Campeche and near Cape Catoche in Yucatan. Treaties signed in Madrid by 1670 assured the logwood cutters of the legitimacy of their business. These treaties also ceded Jamaica to England and stated that both Spain and England should cease hostilities and live in perpetual peace.<sup>10</sup> The English Baymen of Yucatan and Belize found the demand for logwood and mahogany in particular substantial. Logwood was used in making dyes, while mahogany was utilized for shipbuilding, timbers, and 18th century English furniture.<sup>11</sup>

Spanish authorities did not abide by the Treaty of Madrid. Attacks were launched against the logwood cutters on the Bay of Campeche and the Mosquito Coast. Englishmen withdrew to British Honduras and the limited protection of the reefs and isolation. When France declared war on Britain in 1779, Spain as an ally

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<sup>9</sup>William Arlington Donohoe, A History of British Honduras (Montreal: Provincial Publishing Co. Ltd., 1946), p. 27.

<sup>10</sup>R. A. Humphreys, The Diplomatic History of British Honduras (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup>Wayne M. Clegern, British Honduras: Colonial Dead End (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), p. 5.

expelled the Belize settlers for about five years. In 1786, an Anglo-Spanish Treaty gave the English the legal right to cut wood between the Siburn and Hondo Rivers. The settlements' population began to grow and English merchants prospered. In 1862, British Honduras was named a colony administered under Jamaica.<sup>12</sup>

### African Influx

The Guatemalan Indians not only survived the Spanish Conquest and the genetic mixing that accompanied it, but have continued as the predominant element in the population of Guatemala today. The few Spaniards, with their Negro slaves, confined themselves to the capitol and began miscegenating. "Mestizos" resulted from white and Indian parentage. White and negro unions produced "mulattoes". An Indian-Negro cross was termed a "zambo". However, Negroes had nearly disappeared as a distinct racial group by the end of the colonial period in Guatemala, having been overwhelmed by larger gene pools.

The outcome of the African Negro in Guatemala was sharply different from that of the Negro in Belize: One can observe distinct Negroid characteristics in the majority of faces throughout the major towns (See Fig. 3).

The English logwood cutters of the early 18th century had no slaves, but immigrants from the Moskito Coast brought in slaves in 1786. In 1821 it became illegal to import slaves from British colonies. Over 4,000 people lived in the territory by 1823; more

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<sup>12</sup>Humphreys, p. 3.



Fig. 3 Negroid features of a Belizean policeman.



than half were slaves. In 1834, slavery was abolished in the West Indies, thirty years before the United States took such action.<sup>13</sup>

The slaves were used primarily for the cutting of mahogany. Some fled into Peten in Guatemala and escaped.<sup>14</sup> Yet in 1798, when the Spaniards offered freedom to the slaves, they remained loyal to their English masters and helped repulse a Spanish invasion at Saint Georges Cay.<sup>15</sup>

Today, most of the Blacks and mulattoes live along the coast in the Belize District and on the Turneffe Islands off Belize City (See map, Fig. 1). Many work in the logging camps and sawmills while others are involved in subsistence farming and fishing. Many of the colony's young blacks left with the construction crews for the Panama Canal. More joined the British and United States Armies during both World War I and World War II.<sup>16</sup> Belize City has an extremely noisy nightlife contributed to by the Black "Breakdown" music. Racial discrimination is the exception rather than the rule in Belize City.<sup>17</sup>

#### Black Caribs

The origin of the Black Carib begins in 1675 when a slave ship carrying several hundred blacks was wrecked on the island of Saint Vincent. The dwindling Carib Indians and the slaves joined forces to exterminate the few French and English on the island and

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<sup>13</sup>Donohoe, p. 34.

<sup>14</sup>Clegern, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup>Donohoe, p. 35.

<sup>16</sup>Caiger, p. 149.

<sup>17</sup>Donohoe, p. 63.

settled down to inter-marriage. By 1760, when the French and English returned to compete for the island, they found the Red Caribs and the numerically superior Black Caribs on the brink of civil war. The "Reds" sided with the English and the "Blacks" sided with the French. A bloody conflict ensued with the Black Caribs and French surrendering in 1796. The French were shipped to Saint Lucia and Martinique. Five thousand Black Caribs were deported to the islands of Bonacca and Rattan off the Moskito Coast. From the Moskito Coast, the Black Carib sailed to around Punta Gorda and Stann Creek.<sup>18</sup>

About seven percent of the population of British Honduras consists of Black Caribs. They presently occupy the coast from Livingston, Guatemala to Stann Creek, British Honduras (See Fig. 4). The men fish around the offshore cays while the bitter manioc is cultivated by the women. Besides Arawak, some English and Spanish words are present in the Black Carib vocabulary today.<sup>19</sup>

### Immigration

Another startling difference between the cultures of Guatemala and Belize is the diversity of peoples to which they have been exposed. Since the Conquest, immigration into Guatemala has been insignificant. Most of this small number are immigrants from adjoining countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico. Most European immigrants passed up Guatemala in favor of Argentina and Brazil. Some Spaniards continue to immigrate, but they settle mainly in the larger cities.

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<sup>18</sup>Caiger, p. 109.

<sup>19</sup>Robert C. West and John P. Augeli, Middle America: Its Lands and Peoples (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1966), p. 404.



Fig. 4 Stann Creek as it empties into the Caribbean Sea.

German planters produced coffee until their plantations were confiscated during World War II. They had enjoyed a dual citizenship privilege until that time, but then had to give their allegiance to either Guatemala or Germany. Most chose Germany.<sup>20</sup>

While Guatemala has suffered a paucity of immigration, little Belize has enjoyed a heterogeneous parade of people. In 1847, the Santa Cruz Indians of Southern Yucatan began a fanatic religious war against other Indian tribes and white settlers. This warfare threatened the existence of British Honduras until 1858, when relative calm returned. Over six thousand Yucatecan whites crossed over the Hondo River, now the northern boundary of the territory and settled in British Honduras. Their main areas of settlement were around Corozal and Orange Walk where they engaged in ranching and sugar cane production.<sup>21</sup>

Spanish mixtures predominate in the north today and comprise twenty-five percent of the country's population. After the crushing of the Sepoy Mutiny in India in 1858, one thousand Indian mutineers and their families were shipped to the territory by order of Parliament. Several hundred Sepoy Indians remain today. In 1865, indentured laborers were imported from China. Most died of overwork, disease, or simply ran away. A number of Italian refugees from Guatemala were given land around Manatee in 1868. Over

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<sup>20</sup>Nathan L. Whetten, Guatemala (The Land and the People) (Yale University Press Ltd., 1961), p. 62.

<sup>21</sup>Caiger, p. 132.

one hundred Syrians are also engaged as merchants and laborers in the country. Many Jamaicans and other West Indians have steadily immigrated to British Honduras to escape the over-population of their islands.<sup>22</sup>

### The Toledo Settlement

Even though environmental determinism has been generally discredited, a great many people believe the tropics to be the white man's grave. The tierra caliente, or tropical lowland, is not open to caucasoid settlement because extended exposure to the climate saps the energy and dulls the ambition of whites.

Such statements are invalid. Indeed, caucasians generally have not distinguished themselves as hardworking, productive settlers in the lowlands; yet cultural rather than natural environmental factors account for this. The Toledo Colony helped to refute the ideas that white men cannot perform hard physical labor and exist in harmony with the tierra caliente.

After the Civil War in the United States, several hundred confederates came to British Honduras. Most received land grants in the Toledo District from Toledo, Young and Company. In 1867, some of the first arrivals built thatched houses on the beach one and a half miles north of Punta Gorda, a Carib village (See Fig. 1). The settlers followed abandoned mahogany trails inland and began

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<sup>22</sup>Caiger, p. 127.



to clear tracts of 160 acres each. An epidemic of cholera swept the settlement in 1868. Many settlers became discouraged and returned to the United States. Those who voluntarily remained, in referring to those who left, would say, "The big forest was too much for them." The colony became more and more tenacious in its desire to stay. they were extremely frugal and completely abstained from alcohol. No market could be found for the banana crop, so the settlers switched to sugar cane. At first animal powered mills were used, but as their prosperity increased, steam powered mills were established. Many settlers became so wealthy on high sugar prices that they had tennis courts and swimming pools constructed. Mahogany was cut as a sideline. After the fall of sugar prices, many of the less efficient producers were ruined. Several hundred descendants of these early caucasian settlers remain as farmers in British Honduras.

Several mistakes were made at the onset of settlement. The men at first continued to work their fields fully dressed and wearing long underwear as they had in the United States. Today, shorts and a hat are commonly worn. Secondly, in maintaining their racial purity, the settlers also chose to remain socially aloof from their neighbors, thus isolating themselves. Thirdly, because of their strict Methodist belief, the settlers poured their extra molasses into the river instead of producing a high quality rum, which could be traded or sold. Fourthly, the settlers took no precautions against malaria; no screens were used. Finally,

many settlers always considered the United States as being home, and the children were sent there for education at adolescence. Many married and chose not to return, thus limiting the growth of the settlement.<sup>23</sup>

### The Mennonites

Since 1958, after the signing of agreements between the government of British Honduras and the leaders of Mennonite communities, over two thousand new settlers have arrived. The Mennonites are descendants of a German speaking religious sect which is widely distributed over North America. Many from Canada developed a dairy industry in a dry area of Mexico.<sup>24</sup>

These communities will have nearly complete autonomy from governmental regulation. Three settlements now exist on the upper reaches of the Hondo, New and Belize Rivers (See map, Fig. 1).<sup>25</sup>

The Mennonites are expected to increase the country's livestock production and already have developed an egg and poultry industry, which will help alleviate Belize's food shortage (See Fig. 5). Further settlements are expected in the extreme southwest corner of the country.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Desmond Holdridge, "Toledo: A Tropical Refugee Settlement in British Honduras," The Geographical Review, Vol. 30, No. 3 (July, 1940), p. 376-393.

<sup>24</sup>British Information Services, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup>West and Augelli, p. 404-405.

<sup>26</sup>British Information Services, p. 12.





Fig. 5 Mennonite store in Belize City.

### Historical Summary of Population Settlement

Guatemala and Belize were both settled by people classified as being of the Mayan culture. This civilization dwindled and disappeared, being supplanted by other Indian groups centered primarily in the highlands of Guatemala. The Indian survived the Spanish Conquest and became the majority element of the population.

However, the area of Belize remained devoid of much human activity and population until the arrival of the Baymen in the 1600's. The Toledo Colony and, more recently, the Mennonites have shown that Caucasians may successfully settle in the tierra caliente. The present population of Belize is composed of the remnants of successive waves of immigration including Mayan descendants, Englishmen, Spaniards, Africans, Black Caribs, Sepoy Indians, Chinese, Italians, Americans and Syrians.

To the contrary, Guatemala received only small quantities of immigrants -- most from neighboring countries, a trickle from Spain, and a few from Germany.

### III. TODAY (PROBLEMS OF PRESENT DAY OCCUPANCE IN BELIZE)

Today, British Honduras imports vast quantities of food to support her population. Livestock, truck farm produce, rice and milk products are particularly in short supply. However, the land is ideally suited for many of these needed items. The soil and sub-tropical climate could easily support such export produce as citrus, sugar, pineapple, and cocoa.

Several factors hinder such progress. Much of the fertile land is lying dormant in the hands of speculators and as Crown Land and not being developed. Furthermore, traditional farming methods have been used simply as a means of subsistence between seasonal jobs of chicle gathering, timber work, or citrus and sugar field work (See Fig. 6).

The typical milpa farmer in British Honduras is a Creole over thirty years old with a younger wife and five children. His palm-thatched house will have 2-3 rooms with a separate kitchen shack. He will pay around three dollars a year rent for his home-site. Every year he will rent about five acres for planting. The land will have to be cleared during February or March, burned in April and planted by hand. Using a pointed stick, he plants corn, yams, cocoa, and beans. Weeding only once with a machete takes about twenty days. Felling and burning the field, shelling the corn, beans, etc., occupies about half the year with the help of immediate family and nearby relatives. The remainder of the year may be spent



Fig. 6 Belizean sawmilling operation.



in seasonal employment or hunting for meat to sell. Mangoes may be grown by the wife to sell by the road. Any money then goes for the purchase of essentials such as flour, baking powder, sugar, kerosene, condensed milk, etc..

At best, this type of subsistence farming provides only a borderline existence. Often the children by their early teens have found life unrewarding enough to move to Belize City or other coastal towns in hopes of finding employment. This rural to urban emigration has put tremendous pressure on Belize City. Surrounded by mangrove swamp, planned expansion is impossible. A mish-mash of architectural styles is found with old colonial buildings interspersed with woodframe stilted shacks and concrete block houses. As yet the tide of people from the countryside has not been stemmed.

Sanitation is a problem. Ideally the city's network of open sewers is cleansed daily by the tide (See Fig. 7). Drinking water traditionally has been supplied by catching rain water from roofs in wooden vats. Recently metal vats produced and marketed by the Mennonites are to be found in abundance. Still, with a three month dry season, shortages can develop.

Nature took steps to relieve Belize City's overcrowding in late October of 1961. Hurricane Hattie swept across the cays and over the coast. Belize City (one foot above sea level) was flooded with over nine feet of water. Early warnings allowed most people to move miles to the highlands, but 275 people died and thousands



Fig. 7 Haulover Creek, into which sewage canals empty.

were left homeless. Some fifty million dollars property damage resulted. Sixteen miles west of Belize City, Hattieville was quickly constructed to house three thousand homeless people. Many choose to remain even today in Hattieville rather than to return to overcrowded Belize City.

The government recognized that because of Belize City's situation and elevation a repetition of the tragedy could take place at any time. A new capital site would have to be chosen. The capital site selected offered the advantages of safety and decentralization. By 1965, work was underway 50 miles west of Belize City at an elevation of 200 feet. Named Belmopan (a contraction of Belize and Mopan Mayan tribe), the new capital is modernistic in design. Despite massive building projects few people have taken up permanent residence in Belmopan as yet, preferring to commute daily by bus or land rover from Belize City (See Fig. 8).

Besides losing her governmental function, Belize City may be losing her port function as well. At present ships must anchor more than a mile offshore due to shallow water. Lighters add greatly to the expense of handling cargo (See Figs. 9, 10). Feasibility studies are being made of a potential new port area near the mouth of the Sibun River, which is five miles south of Belize City.

The main problem observed is the overcrowding of Belize City. Concentration of over 40,000 people is not only a problem





Fig. 8 Belmopan, the new capital.



Fig. 9 Shallow draft craft at the mouth of Haulover Creek.



Fig. 10 Carib sailing craft used as lighters.

of lack of land space, but this over-centralization reduces the available labor force in the rest of the country (See Fig. 11). The construction of Belmopan may indeed draw people inland to settle, but other measures are needed too. In order to decentralize Belize City, a livelihood must be provided suitable for large numbers of people in the interior. Despite attractive eleven year tax holidays and other concessions to foreign business and industry, few investors have been willing to risk their time and money in a country with such a small market and poor transportation facilities. Several Americans have established large cattle ranching operations, but have been barred from exporting their beef and have price limits set by the government. One method of encouraging the Belizean to return from the city to the soil would be to offer government held land as homesteads.

Marketing boards should be expanded to provide a guaranteed minimum price to farmers on all needed crops. Facilities should also be established for the collecting, grading, and transportation of produce. Perhaps cooperatively purchased vehicles could eliminate the high cost of cargo haulage.

Although the Mennonite settlements are relatively successful, immigration by North Americans interested mainly in land speculation profits on a short term basis should be discouraged. Possible recruitment of groups similar to the Mennonites, such as the Amish, should be studied carefully. It must be remembered that one could expect only a very low standard of living at present under vastly





Fig. 11 Crowded Swing Bridge in Belize City.

more primitive conditions than now exist for most North Americans. At any rate, the potential immigrant should be informed about the feasibility of his agricultural scheme and have enough capital to maintain him through many lean years. Generally, immigrants from Florida find climate and soil conditions quite similar and therefore adapt more quickly than others.

More jobs could be provided in the interior by developing the numerous Mayan ruins and perhaps commercializing some of the present day Indian groups for increased tourism. Few tourists venture down the long, tiring road from Merida, Yucatan because the entire route must then be retraced. If present roads such as the "Western Highway" were extended to tie Belize with Guatemala, an appealing "Mayaland loop" would be formed which might attract thousands of North American visitors.

Extending the present road system of British Honduras to connect with that of Guatemala would do much to improve accessibility for a growing tourist market. However, political cooperation rather than physical limitations seems to hinder such progress.

#### IV. RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

As stated in the introduction, Belize was settled by the British beginning in the early 1600's and was named a colony in 1862. Previously Britain had signed several treaties with Spain which allowed British settlement, but preserved Spanish sovereignty. In reality, Spain never had exercised effective control over the area. Her successive, abortive military attempts to subdue the territory ceased by 1798.

The Guatemalan claim to Belize is based on the doctrine of "uti possidetis". This doctrine states that a province which has won independence through revolution against its colonial master inherits the territorial boundaries and rights claimed by the colonial nation. With independence from Spain in 1821, Guatemala asserted that Spain's claim to Belize was transferred to her. Mexico advanced a similar claim to the northern half of Belize as far as the Sibun River. Under Spanish rule, the boundaries between Guatemala and the Captaincy-General of Yucatan were unclear. Indeed, most Spanish dealings with Belize were handled through Yucatan and not Guatemala, thus weakening Guatemala's claim. The doctrine of "uti possidetis" itself was challenged in the mid-nineteenth century by Lord Palmerston's doctrine allowing a revolutionary government to claim only the land under its direct occupation; neither Guatemala's nor Mexico's cases fit that criterion.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Narda Dobson, A History of Belize (London: Butler & Tanner Ltd., 1973), p.126.



As discussed in the introduction of this paper, there remains a dispute as to the validity of the Anglo-Guatemalan Treaty of 1859. Yet, whether or not Britain went back on her promise to build a road connecting Guatemala City with the coast, the boundaries delineated have been maintained. Even those Guatemalan maps showing Belize as a department under Guatemalan sovereignty repeat the 1859 boundaries.

Having shown in Chapter II the development of a unique people and culture, a society now exists which seeks the right of self-determination toward possible independence. Britain has supported this right by granting total domestic self-government in 1964. Furthermore, Britain has agreed to grant total independence when requested by the Belizean Government.

The main impediment to total independence is Guatemala's often repeated threat to seize Belize by force. Without British support, there would be little doubt as to the eventual outcome of a military confrontation. Both of Belize's two major political parties favor independence, but they disagree on the means of that goal. The Peoples' United Party (P. U. P), under George Price's leadership, has fallen under widespread mistrust after trying to negotiate with Guatemala in secret, possibly offering territorial concessions. The opposition seeks total independence only after gaining binding defense agreements from Britain. A major confrontation between P. U. P. and the United Democratic Party (U. D. P.) occurred when a P. U. P. supporter shot and wounded four U. D. P.

followers during a political rally at Courthouse Wharf on July 29, 1975 (See Fig. 12). The alleged gunman was bailed out by eight P. U. P. supporters and his lawyer, Senator Said Musa of P. U. P. The author attended a U. D. P. rally at Courthouse Wharf several days later, at which a U. D. P. leader threatened to trade "bullet for bullet, kick for kick, and karate for karate" with the P. U. P. Inflammatory statements on both sides added to animosity created by the "Paint War" in which assassination threats and counter-threats were spray-painted on any available wall (See Fig. 13).

Many citizens interviewed stated a desire to replace George Price, but felt that Guatemalan threats made it necessary to present a united front without internal bickering at the present time (See Fig. 14). The external threat seemed real enough in November 1975, when Guatemala moved ten armored personnel carriers and new troops to the border, plus putting her twelve thousand man armed forces on alert. England responded by adding five hundred British troops to her six hundred and fifty man garrison, plus landing six vertical take-off "Harrier" jets. Also, the frigate HMS Zulu was dispatched to the Belizean coast.<sup>28</sup> No hostilities were reported. Most observers agree that it was primarily the British presence rather than Belize's three hundred voluntary national guardsmen that prevented any incursions.

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<sup>28</sup>"The Lion Roared," Newsweek, November 11, 1975, p. 64.



Fig. 12 Courthouse Wharf, next to the central market.

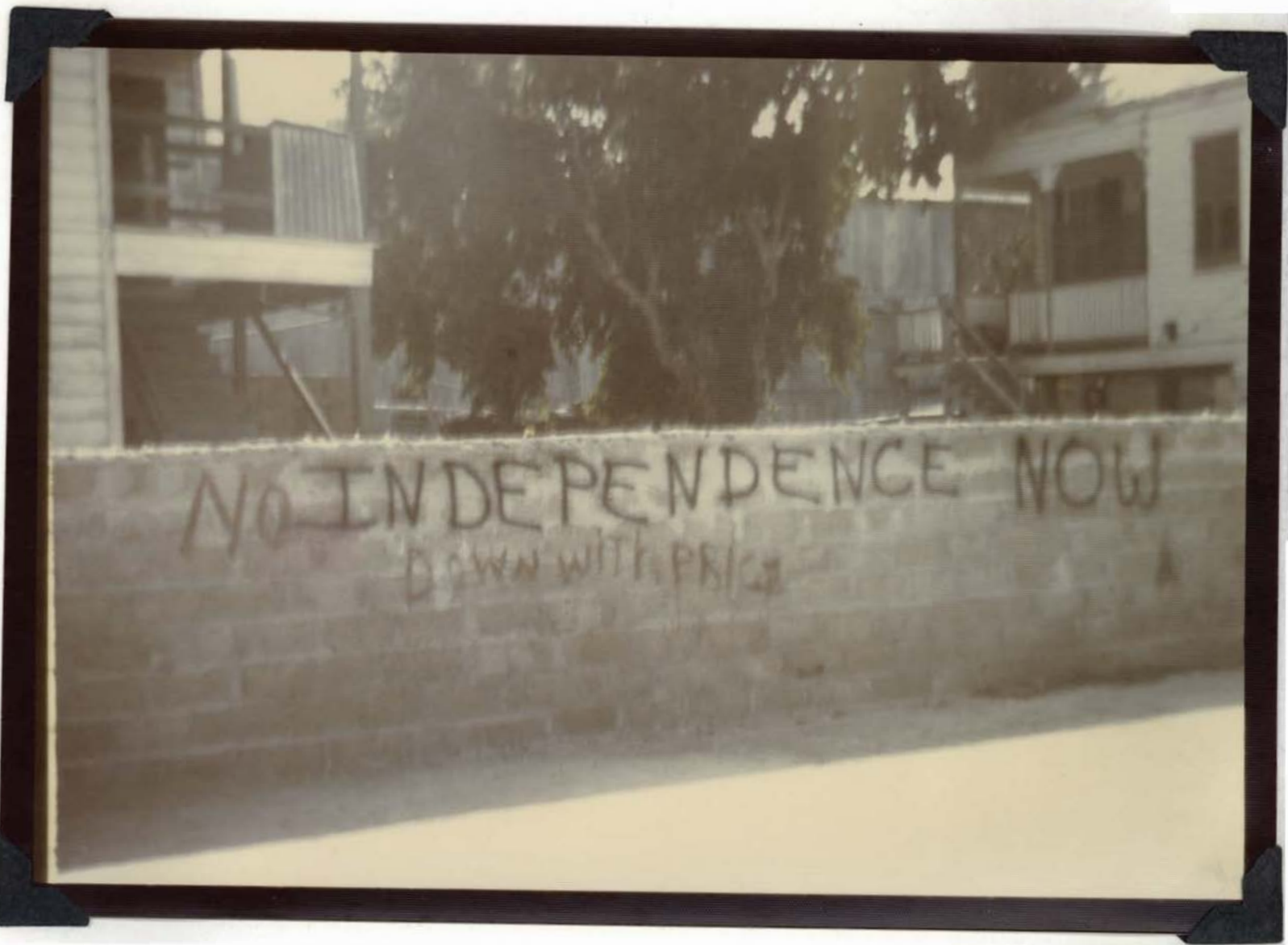


Fig. 13 Example of "Paint War".





Fig. 14 Official Residence of Premier George Price.



How long this essential British support can be counted on is a matter of speculation. Prince Phillip, visiting in the summer of 1975, said, "Guatemala wants you, we don't."<sup>29</sup>

The question of political control must be decided before any likely gains in economic development will be forthcoming. As the writer has stressed, the racial uniqueness of Belize would hamper any easy assimilation of the state upon absorption by Guatemala. Language transition from English to Spanish for the majority of Belizeans would be disruptive of their established society. Their long history of usage of English common laws and protection of individual rights would be compromised. Belize also represents a Protestant enclave in a Roman Catholic Latin America. Various Protestant churches have established and operated denominational schools since the nineteenth century. The Belizean Government has encouraged these church schools by providing matching funds. Guatemalan control could jeopardize this widespread segment of the Belizean school system.

Numerous people interviewed felt Guatemala's renewed territorial claims were simply a means to divert attention from Guatemala's internal problems. In fact, the presence of British troops in Belize helps to curtail persistent guerilla activity in the Peten by policing possible supply routes.

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<sup>29</sup>Wall Street Journal (New York), December 8, 1975, p.24.

With the tragic results of the recent Guatemalan earthquake, reconstruction rather than expansion should occupy the Guatemalan Government in the near future. Since the distinctive character and heritage of the Belizean people has been revealed and their desire for independence expressed, the time seems auspicious for such political bodies as the United Nations and the Organization of American States to support Belize's move toward nationhood. In conclusion the author's evidence indicates Belize's unique historical development does make it an odd or atypical state deserving of sovereignty.

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Numerous citizens of Belize were interviewed by the author regarding political aspirations for their country. Their names will remain confidential.