In the land of the humming bird

BY DOROTHY BETTES COLLINS, '24

The Indians long ago called the tropical island Trinidad "The Land of the Humming-Bird." The name was well chosen because Trinidad enjoys continual summertime and flowers, but today a very few of the eighteen species of these dazzling little feathered beauties are to be seen. The reason is difficult to give exactly. The island has become thickly settled and with the coming of motor cars, oil wells and the clearing of the bush everywhere, they have been driven away. A law now prohibits the caging and exporting of these sunshine birds to other countries.

There is a tradition in the locality that an Indian village once occupied the spot of the Pitch lake. These Indians offended the Good Spirit by destroying the humming-birds, which were animated by the souls of their deceased relations, and were therefore as a punishment, engulfed with their village and all their belongings.

Adjoining the Pitch or Asphalt lake which is situated in the southwestern promontory of Trinidad and is of course that natural phenomenal feature which makes Trinidad famous today, is located the colony called Brighton, where the writer has been living the past three years.

A winding road takes one past our modern bungalows, painted white and enclosed with trim green hibiscus hedges and bougainvillea vines. General offices, club, tennis courts and a nine hole golf course are also an integral part of this little colony.

Looking across the Gulf of Paria from our colony, one can see the lofty range of mountains forming eastern Venezuela and northern Trinidad. Bocas del Dragon, the straits to the north, which separate Trinidad and the mainland of South America loom like gigantic gateways joining the Caribbean and the Gulf of Paria.

Boats come and go from all parts of the world to the Brighton pier for asphalt.

The Pitch lake is a bowl-like depression covering an area of about eighty acres. Contrary to general ideas of tourists, the surface is hard enough to bear foot or truck traffic, provided one does not tarry. Wandering crevices and holes filled with water are often inhabited by tiny fish.

Black native labor dig out the pitch with picks in large porous lumps for shipment, it then being conveyed to vessels by an overhead cable tramway. A continuous stream of filled and empty buckets move steadily up and down the hill and along the pier until the vessels awaiting are loaded. Trinidad asphalt has been used on many roads in Oklahoma.

Roads in Trinidad are narrow and winding but are all asphalt paved. Following the English custom every one drives to the left. Motor cars of mostly American and English make are used. Many two-wheeled donkey carts are yet to be seen rambling along with a load of green bananas or green cocoanuts. Extensive forests enable one to drive in shade. Ferns grow profusely and majestic bamboos fringe the roads. Many species of fragrant orchids grow wild.

Trinidad lies ten degrees north of the equator with an average temperature of 90°F. The nights with a temperature of 68°F are cool enough when one becomes accustomed to the climate to use a blanket. The island is out of the hurricane zone and free from any volcanic disturbances. Two seasons divide the year, the rainy or wet season extends from May to December.

The interesting population is very cosmopolitan. Languages spoken are English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese and Hindustani. One third of the population is East Indian, the remaining portion black, with a small percentage of whites.
The East Indians were brought as indentured labor from India and follow very closely the customs of the old country. They work for small pay on the extensive sugar plantations, cocoa and coconut estates. The cutlass, a broad curved knife, is used for nearly all work by the natives. Their homes are built low on the ground of bamboo and mud with thatched roofs. Because of religious superstitions they cook mostly on brass dishes over a clay oven.

The Indian women wear long skirts with a white sari (veil) over their heads and around their waist. A gold rosetta is worn in the nose. It is said that the wealth of a "coolie" woman is indicated by the number of heavy silver bracelets she wears on her arms and ankles. These women do very heavy manual labor and can balance huge loads on their heads with perfect grace.

Men have adopted modern dress more, yet many still wear the white turban cloth wound around the head and a long skirted sarong. The small children play along the road half clothed and usually without any. They are married at an early age.

Customs are different and to many of them we must adapt ourselves readily. English currency together with notes issued by Canadian banks is used.

As the days are shorter in the tropics the stores close at four o'clock, giving time for outdoor sports such as tennis, cricket, soccer, rugby and golf. Horse racing with all the excitement of sweepstakes and betting are held four times a year.

Tea is customarily served at four o'clock and dinner at a much later hour than is the custom at home.

Open air markets with all vegetables and fruits are to be had as at home and with many new ones, such as yams, bananas, plantains, papaws (a tree melon), pigeon peas, alligator pears, mangoes, guavas, grapefruit and limes. Fish is to be had in abundance, also fresh shrimps and crabs.

Palms of all varieties flourish. But alone from the royal palm can be obtained that rare delicacy called mountain-cabbage. The green top of the tree must be cut and stripped, until the white heart is reached. This can only be compared to the heart of celery but possesses a more delicious flavor than can really be described. The heart of the palm is chopped and prepared with a French dressing. All foreigners are fond of this salad.

Among the white population the mode of living and dress, except for much lighter clothing, is little different than in many parts of the United States. Well stocked grocery and dry goods stores furnish one with any substance or article which they may desire with the option in many cases of selecting from products originating from Europe, Canada and the United States.

Electricity, telephone, talking pictures, the motor car with Trinidad's good roads paved with the famous natural asphalt, the air mail and passenger service and last but not least, the radio place Trinidad in the rank considered modern.

And small the world really is—because as far away as we are, we still have Soon-erland with us. Another University of Oklahoma couple live within ten minutes of our colony, Mr and Mrs Louis Cocke. Mrs Cocke was Miss Sadie Long, '29 of Hobart. Mr Cocke is employed as engineer with the Standard Oil Company.

Marion Foster Ten Eyck '24, Chickasha also lived here for a year but has now returned to California to make her home. We have had the great pleasure of entertaining several geologists from the university as Rolfe Engleman and George Seiverson, passing through from Venezuela. We hope to see others join the winter tourists who visit Trinidad and give us the surprise visit.

Needless to say the chatter that pursues during these meetings outrivals the noisy parrakeets at sunset.