

Edgar Kaiser's attachment to Jamaica

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The initial steps taken in the 1940s to start the bauxite industry in Jamaica grew into a deep and mutual attachment between Jamaicans and expatriates who contributed their skills and commitment to make the new venture work.

The mission of those pioneer companies, Reynolds, Alcan, and Kaiser, to transform 'red dirt' into 'red gold' would literally not have gotten off the ground without the positive support given by ordinary Jamaicans who came in contact with them as they surveyed, and later purchased, lands for mining.

The companies introduced First World mining technology, but it was the human resource qualities available to the industry that helped to establish Jamaica as the world's leading producer of bauxite in the 1960s and made it the important sector of the Jamaican economy that it still is today.

Pioneer leaders

It may be invidious to start calling names, yet no account of that journey could be complete without mention of some of the Jamaicans who are among the pioneer leaders of the industry.

Names such as Alcan's Dr Keith Panton, Kaiser's Bobby Honiball, Rudolph Jobson of Reynolds, and the Jamaica Bauxite Institute's (JBI) Dr Carlton Davis come instantly to mind.

From the overseas side, the industrial magnate Edgar Kaiser, who presided over the empire built by his father, Henry J. Kaiser, was one of those unforgettable personalities who endeared himself to Jamaicans from all walks of life during his numerous trips to Jamaica.

Kaiser Aluminium's remarkable growth was fuelled by bauxite from Jamaica, and Edgar became personally involved in some of the major issues that determined his company's corporate relationship with Jamaica, as the following story will exemplify.

In 1974, Kaiser was among those companies negotiating with the Government over issues of reshaping national policy in terms of the industry's financial returns to Jamaica.

Things came to a head when the parties could not agree, and when Prime Minister Michael Manley announced new legislation leading to the bauxite levy, a Kaiser biography reports that "the industry group, stunned, submitted the dispute to an international body for settlement."

It was at that point that Edgar Kaiser stepped back from the rest, declaring that "in a spirit of co-operation, we can and intend to arrive at a mutually beneficial agreement."

Intense negotiations were launched between Kaiser Aluminium and Jamaica to formulate an answer and a new position.

The mutual admiration that existed between Manley and Kaiser is illustrated by the following anecdote related by a Kaiser employee.

Kaiser had attended an early-morning meeting with the prime minister at Jamaica House on the important levy discussions and was due to leave at 9 a.m. to catch his flight.

However, the meeting went an hour overtime, and about 10 a.m., with the plane waiting on the tarmac, and the driver and Mrs Kaiser waiting patiently in the car, the two men came out of Jamaica House and walked slowly to the vehicle while carrying on an animated conversation which continued for another half-an-hour.

It was Dudley Thompson, the then minister of mining, who eventually broke up the conversation by nudging Kaiser gently into his seat and hurrying the party to the airport.

In the car, Kaiser explained that Manley and himself both realised that they were running behind time but that he did not consider it protocol for him to adjourn the meeting with the prime minister, hence the delay.

In the meantime, the prime minister, who himself was running late for a Parliamentary appointment, was explaining to an aide that he could not possibly be the one to adjourn a conversation with such a charming gentleman like Kaiser as that would have been poor manners and in any case, "we were enjoying each others' company immensely."

Of such was the relationship between two powerful personalities who often sat on different sides of the table, but enjoyed a deep and mutual attachment that forged the kind of relationship between Jamaica and foreign investment necessary for partnerships to work.

It will be a relationship we will need to secure and preserve as we look towards maintaining and rebuilding the bauxite/alumina industry in the difficult period ahead.

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