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FROM THE PUBLISHER

When I read THE BELIZE TIMES, I only scan Emory?s column. But last week he was talking about the 1931 hurricane, and that will make anyone from my generation sit up and take notice. We grew up in the 1950?s listening late at night to stories about the 1931 hurricane ? dramatic rescues and tragic deaths. In the 1950?s, 1931 seemed like a long time before, but the hurricane had struck Belize only 25 years or so before we were listening to the stories. It was the African oral tradition at its best. I can?t say when the late Ernest Cain wrote his book about the 1931 hurricane, but I think it was after we had grown up listening to the stories.Before we proceed, I think it is important in this week of commemoration of our history, to pay our respects to Mr. Cain, and also to the man H.H. Cain, who was his father, I believe. H.H. Cain published a black, Garveyite newspaper in British Honduras around the time of World War I. If I remember correctly, the newspaper was called THE INDEPENDENT.The Cain family is a unique one in Belize, because they are people one can consider middle class, but who have always been roots in their philosophy. (I use the word ?roots? to refer to the working class.) At this stage of my life, I see the difference between our middle class and our working class in terms of choices made generations ago. Middle class Belizeans decided to accept British values and the European way of life as life as guidelines for their families. For whatever the reasons, working class people in the old capital held on to some customs, values and perspectives which we now know to be African in derivation. The Cains have had middle class skills while remaining African and roots. ?Nuff respect.As a child of the middle class, I was raised to believe what I read in books. All the books I got access to were written by Europeans, and these are-one sided and racist when they discuss Africans and indigenous Americans. So this is the cause of my personal rebellion and odyssey ? too many lies in books I read between the ages of five and eighteen.The column is becoming too wide ranging, so I will come to the point. The big don of the Belize Historical Society, Emory King, in his column published in THE BELIZE TIMES of Sunday, September 5, 2004, is saying that the people who were in charge of British Honduras on September 10, 1931, could have saved many of the 2000 lives lost in the 1931 hurricane ?if the authorities had warned the people, but they decided not to disrupt the celebration.? According to Mr. King, ?Bishop Joseph Murphy reported afterwards: ?Officials, businessmen and clergy were notified and the news made them anxious and nervous. It was thought better to defer the announcement to the public and the day?s programme was not called off.??The heading of Mr. King?s article is SOME NEW STATS ON THE 1931 HURRICANE. The year 2004 is 73 years after 1931, so the first question I ask is: where did these ?new stats? come from? According to Emory, ?We have been told a lie all those years.? Now, Mr. King does not say which denomination this ?Bishop Joseph Murphy? belonged to, but Murphy sounds like an Irish name to me, and the Irish are generally Roman Catholics. Incidentally, Emory King?s first job when he landed in Belize was that of a public relations officer for the Jesuits, who were mostly Americans of Irish and German ancestry in 1952 in British Honduras. The thing is, St. John?s College in 1931 was at Loyola Park in the Yarborough area of Belize. The college buildings were swept away to the storm and many priests, scholastics and students were killed.According to Emory King?s article in last weekend?s PUP newspaper, this ?new stats? is contained in a letter from the Superintendent of the Wireless Station to the Colonial Secretary on September 24, 1931, two weeks after the catastrophe. This is an old document, as far as I know. My opinion is that the Superintendent of the Wireless Station would have been a man who was trying to clear himself of blame in the aftermath of the tragedy. The Superintendent, whom Mr. King does not name, says that the ?first intimation of the storm was received on Tuesday the 8th, when a warning was broadcast ?? We note that the Superintendent of the Wireless Station does not say who was the source of that ?first intimation.? The Wireless Superintendent goes on to say: ?On Wednesday the 9th an advisory from Washington confirmed that the storm (south of Jamaica) was heading west-north-west. At 10:45 p.m. Wednesday, New Orleans reported that the storm had become a hurricane and could pass over British Honduras Thursday afternoon. I took the information to the Telephone Exchange to warn the southern towns. ?On Thursday morning, the 10th, at 6:45 Washington advised that the hurricane would strike British Honduras. At 8:20 several ships reported they were fleeing into Puerto Castille and La Ceiba. At 9 a.m. the hurricane was reported off Honduras and heading west.?Copies of these reports were sent to the Harbour Master and various shipping companies. Copies were also posted at the Bridge Foot.?At 10:30 a.m. advice was received that the hurricane could reach Belize in the afternoon. It was then sent out by telephone to all possible authorities.?The wind began to increase; by 3 p.m. it was 132 miles per hour.?I would say to Mr. King that when you deal with the 1931 hurricane, you had better make sure your ?stats? are very tight. Emory King is accusing the colonial authorities of what amounts to manslaughter by negligence because of celebration politics. The Wireless Superintendent?s letter, I think clearly

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indicates that there was confusion about where this storm would strike. (Remember that in 1998, Mitch was headed straight for Belize. The captain of the Windjammer *Fantome* decided to run south from Belize to the Bay Islands of Honduras. He ran straight into Mitch, which had decided to change direction and go south. The *Fantome* and its crew disappeared forever.) Here are some questions Mr. King must answer. The 10:30 a.m. ?advice? on September 10, 1931: just for the record, from whom was it received? Again, on Wednesday, the day before the tragedy, the Wireless Superintendent?s first priority was to warn ?the southern towns.? But less than 24 hours later, ships were heading to Honduras, just south of British Honduras, for shelter. Does this not suggest confusion? ?The clergy were notified,? reports Bishop Murphy: was Murphy himself not a ?clergy?? So why were not the Jesuits (?clergy?) at Loyola Park informed? If they were informed, why did they not try to save themselves and their students? The Jesuits were American citizens, and all these warnings were coming from the United States (Washington and New Orleans). Back to the question of the hurricane?s destination, if the storm was ?off Honduras and heading west?, why were ships ?fleeing? into Puerto Castille and La Ceiba Thursday morning?The old people told us children that before the 1931 hurricane, our people did not know of any weather like that which struck them that September 10 afternoon. The old people told us that the majority of the casualties in 1931 took place after the first hurricane winds came to an end. People came out of their homes and shelters, and then the winds came from the opposite direction, along with the storm surge. Most people drowned. The fact that the winds ceased, then came from the opposite direction, means that the eye of the hurricane passed directly over Belize. No one in Belize knew of hurricane ?eyes? in 1931.Where hurricanes were concerned, there was nothing like the wealth of information and the precision of reports we receive nowadays. There was no radio station in British Honduras in 1931. September 10 was the biggest holiday of the year in the colony, except for Christmas.When that 10:30 a.m. ?advice? was received on September 10 morning, 1931, at the Wireless Station, and ?sent out by telephone to all possible authorities,? the ?Centenary? mood would have already kicked in, and Belizeans would have been drinking. The tradition was for the younger adults to party all night on the Ninth of September before the march, the horse races, and the athletic events on the Tenth. (I think it was in 1971 that we UBAD officers were leading a September Tenth parade up Swing Bridge when a Police Superintendent stopped us at the top of the bridge and told us to disperse because a hurricane was on the way. We said, to hell with it, and marched through the ?hurricane.?)My key points are that our people did not know of hurricanes in 1931, and the jamming had already started when that 10:30 a.m. ?advice? arrived. (There was no way of disseminating information rapidly and thoroughly in 1931.)If it sounds as if I am letting the colonial authorities off the hook, I would say that I have never been an apologist for the British or for white supremacy. But if the boss of the Belize Historical Society is going to make these categorical, unilateral, capital charges 73 years after the fact, then he must realize this is not a short story he is writing. There is little room for speculation and surmise in this kind of matter. I consider Mr. King?s article last week to be a careless exercise. It is precisely because of the same cavalier approach he brings to the 18th century history of the settlement of Belize, that Mr. King is ignored by most Belizeans. Black people were catching hell in Belize in the 18th century. That history is serious business. Power to the people.