

Cover Story: Everybody's Nephew

By Ian Anderson



As the FMS Bar has opened again after 10 years “Under renovation” our thoughts turn to its history and its long-serving Barman Pang Chee Ein.

February 22, 1906, was a special day in Ipoh although it probably was not recognised as such at the time. It was the day that Hainanese immigrant, Cheam Tong Lin and

partner, Jwi Fong Loon, opened the doors of the “FMS Hotel” for the first time, the name being an acronym for “Federated Malay States”. Situated on the corner of Post Office Road and Belfield Street, it immediately became a popular venue for a wide range of customers, particularly the Europeans who were not members of the Ipoh Club. The hotel rooms were said to be comfortable and the pleasant bar/restaurant downstairs served quality English fare daily as well as Curry Tiffin on Sundays. The chef was also Hainanese, a race famous for their culinary skills. With cool Stengahs available, there could be no better place to spend a few hours of leisure. The English newspaper, the Perak Pioneer summed up the establishment rather well on May 7, 1908, when they reported:

“The FMS Hotel here, run by Messrs Jwi Fong Loong and Co, situated at the corner of Belfield and Post Office Road, is doing great business, and the rooms available are practically full every day. In the restaurant line, the place is equally popular, and many residents mess there daily. If Messrs. Sarkies Brothers intend opening up, they had better start at once, or they will find the ground very much cut away from below their feet, as the charges asked in the present establishment are very reasonable and the cuisine excellent.”

The reference to the Sarkies related of course to the negotiations they had entered into with the government to build their next luxury hotel in Ipoh.



Those famous batwing doors on Brewster Road



... now, the Durbar Restaurant

The oldest bar in Malaysia gets a new lease on life as the Durbar Restaurant

A New Beginning

The partnership and the hotel prospered despite the entry and exit of Pierre Creet's famous Grand Hotel, the new and successful Ipoh Station Hotel (The Majestic) and the numerous small Rumah Tumpangan (Boarding Houses) along Hale Street, just a stone's throw away. But in the early 1920s, the partnership broke up. Cheam Tong Lin bought over his partner's shares and in 1923 moved the famous hotel to a new site at No. 2 Brewster Road, opposite the 'Padang'. Allegedly built in the early 20th Century by Cheam Tong Lin, the building, although closed, still stands.



The concept at the new site was very similar to the previous one with the hotel upstairs and the bar/restaurant downstairs. Access to the seven rooms was up a steep wooden staircase. The word “Rooms” is probably a misnomer for they were more like cubicles but clean and comfortable; they were very popular. Cheam Tong Lin continued to prosper and had at least two sons, one of whom, Cheam Yeow Toon (or Ah Toon as was normally known) joined him at the FMS, eventually, in the 1940s, taking over the business from his father. Cheam senior passed away on November 14, 1957, and his demise was reported in The Straits Times:

“THE DEATH occurred on 13/11/57, of Mr Cheam Tong Lin father of Mr Cheam Yeow Toon (F.M.S Hotel). Funeral on 17/11/57 at 12 noon from 6 Tatlock Street, Ipoh, to the Tambun Road Cemetery.”



A Special Rate

In 1950, a double room costs \$6 a day – a single room \$4. However, there was another ‘special’ rate at \$2 for two hours. During the 50s this was said to be very popular with British Army wives who took advantage of the facilities while their husbands were away in the jungle on anti-communist patrols. On one occasion, when proprietor Yeow Toon wanted to reduce the number of bedroom attendants, one agreed to work for no salary rather than leave. When questioned he said that he could make more with tips from the “2-hour” guests than he could earn elsewhere.

A Nephew Joins the Team

It was also in 1950 that a young boy, 12 years old arrived at the FMS Hotel. Born in Johor where his father ran a coffee shop, he had left school and apart from helping his father on trips to Singapore to buy produce for the shop, there was no work for him. So it was arranged that he would be sent to Ipoh to work for his uncle Cheah Yeow Toon, his father's brother. He was supposed to be the errand boy but within a few weeks found his way behind the bar he could barely see over. He worked behind that bar for 60 years. He was Pang Chee Ein. They called him "Nephew".



At the time a big bottle of Anchor Beer costs 65 cents and young Nephew must have served hundreds of bottles per week to the many miners and planters who found their way there. It was also a favourite after-match venue for the cricket, rugby and football teams who had played their heart out on the Padang. Personally, your author met Nephew for the first time in 1961 over a steaming plate of sausages and mash, with Anchor accompaniment, having just played a memorable game of Rugby on the Padang. Finally, there were always British Government officers who drank there, generally more 'starchy' than those from the plantations and mines. They drank "Gin Pahits" or "Whisky Stengahs" and Nephew served them all.

Everybody's Nephew

But what about the name Nephew? Of course, he was the nephew of Cheam Yeow Toon, but there is a wonderful story about how he actually got the name. In Malaya, it was quite common for totally unrelated people to politely call their elders "Uncle" or "Auntie". To some extent, this continues today. Consequently, it is said that one evening a newly-arrived planter was greeted by

young Nephew with “Hello Uncle”, to which he replied, “If I am your uncle you must be my nephew”. Whatever the truth, the name stuck! He was everybody’s nephew.

Again the chef was Hainanese and the menu retained many of the popular European dishes like Fish and Chips, Lamb Chops, Lamb Stew and Steaks, but some more local tastes were added and the restaurant also became well-known for its curry puffs, baked crab and inche kabin (Nonya Style Deep Fried Chicken with Dipping Sauce).

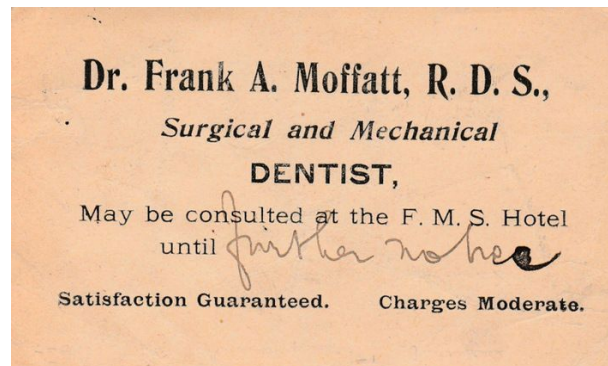
Fun and Games

The famous bar was undoubtedly a place where legends were made. Indeed Nephew himself became one. But there were others, relating to the behaviour of some of the customers after a few beers. There were belly fighting contests amongst the miners and planters, some of whom became quite portly in their three years “On Station”. Then there was the raw egg swallowing contests with the resident champion, Malaya-born, Colonel Dara Singh (distinguished soldier, police officer and jungle fighter). Every Thursday was ANZAC night, with singing, dancing and trishaw races around Old Town. In later years Nephew used to tell stories about those nights and how a few couples met at these gatherings and later became man and wife.



The Décor

Turning to the décor, the hotel was pretty sparse with nothing but the odd small picture on the wall to break up the monotony. But downstairs was a different story. Entry was through batwing doors and inside there were private curtained cubicles for that romantic dinner. Further in was the large polished bar and beyond that the province of the Hainanese chef – the kitchen. Over the years, Nephew had collected all manner of memorabilia from his guests, postcards, press cuttings, cartoons and more. As the years went by the collection grew. The author Noel Barber was a customer at one time and he described the downstairs bar/restaurant in his book, “The War of the Running Dogs”:



“The FMS Bar in Ipoh, which had been run by the same family for three generations, was unlike any other in Malaya. Not far from the station, a firm favourite with the planters and miners, it had the swing doors of a Western movie, an L-shaped bar with a big fridge behind it, a Victorian pendulum clock on the wall, and an abacus rattling at one end of the bar. At the far end of the room, three curtained cubicles awaited those who wanted dinner.”

A Change of Ownership



Uncle Ah Toon passed away in 1993 and in his will left the building and businesses to his daughters. After trying to run them for a while with Nephew still in place downstairs, they sold it in 1995, lock, stock and barrel, to a local businessman. For a while, the hotel and bar were closed, but not long after,

in March 1996, Nephew leased the bar and restaurant from the new owner and was soon back in business. His two long-standing waitresses, Florence and Iris, were also back and his son was the Hainanese chef. Nothing had changed.

However, the hotel remained closed, transforming itself into a very good restaurant specialising in heritage Hainanese food; quite a different fare to that downstairs. This was a great place to eat with open windows overlooking the Padang and attracting a gentle breeze to supplement the creaking antique fans overhead, giving the feeling of Colonial days gone by. To add to the diners' pleasure the walls were lined with memorabilia – advertisements from F&N in the 60s, posters and historic notices from Communist times, old photographs of Ipoh and even one of Malaysia's first Cabinet Members with names written in Jawi! Antiques in polished cabinets completed the scene. It was a great place to wallow in nostalgia. Sadly, a few years later the windows were sealed and air conditioning installed at the request of the local diners. No longer a pleasant breeze, but a chill that gets into the bones. How could they?

The Oldest Pub in Malaysia

The famous Bar and Restaurant downstairs, the oldest pub in Malaysia, celebrated its 100th anniversary on February 22, 2006. Nephew presided over a guest list limited to 50 people several of whom had come from overseas especially for the occasion. Your author was one of the privileged guests and a great night was had by all. Louis Rozario Doss, former Principal of St Michael's Institution, and an old friend of Nephew was Chairman of the get-together and emcee for the occasion. As the party really got going, he had to resort to a loudhailer to make himself heard.



The centenary celebration, expats galore

One particularly boisterous group were all ex Osborne and Chappell staff; Bill Lawson, 67, and Michael Joll, 64, from London, Jack Simpson, 68, from Sydney and Ken Hart, also 68. Ken had

been a regular patron of the FMS, from 1959 to 1978. Jack's wife Elizabeth also joined the party as did Gopeng Consolidated mining engineer, John Rogers. Joli arrived in 1964 and stayed for 18 years. He was just 20 and this was his first Christmas away from his home in Cornwall. He remembered:

“Ah Toon had put on a Christmas dinner with traditional roast turkey for all the Mat Salleh bachelors and it was like coming from home to another home.”

Closure!

Just two years after the centenary celebration we were informed that the FMS had to close for major renovations associated with the floor of the old hotel premises upstairs. The whole place would need to be gutted and closure was to be in March 2008. The last night was a sombre affair and although many people came to bid their farewells there was no farewell party. Nephew spent most of the evening answering calls from well-wishers at home and overseas. Of course, there was talk of Nephew coming back after the renovation, but in our hearts, we all knew that would not be the case.

Two years later, at the beginning of June 2010, Nephew passed away. He was 74. It seems that after so long behind the FMD bar, he had lost the will to live. Nephew was a gentle and kind person who never had a bad word about anyone. He was not only the well-loved barman of the FMS, but he was friend and confidante to literally thousands of people from all over the globe who had dropped in the FMS for a 'quick one' over his sixty years as barman there. He never forgot their names and to him, they were not just customers, but old friends that he had shared many happy evenings with.

Today the FMS has reopened with a brand new bar and all retro fittings. Renamed the Durbar Restaurant, it serves most of the dishes that FMS was known for. But without Nephew behind the bar, the nostalgia is gone.