

A Miracle in the Sky over Antigua

By W R K White

Never before, and maybe never again will so many on this island witness the dead of night in the middle of the day. It happened last Thursday. And the entire population of Antigua and Thousands of visitors took up vantage points around the country to see a once in a lifetime total eclipse of the sun.

It was the first over Antigua in the last 360 years and the last in the Western Hemisphere this century.

Schools remained closed for the day and government declared a public half-holiday, Prime Minister Lester Bird said primarily in the interest of safety of children. He said the half day would allow parents to manage their children's viewing of the phenomenon.

An unprecedented education/information series mounted by the Government owned ABS Radio and Television ensured every family was well aware of the beauty and the inherent dangers of the miracle in the sky.

As the day approached, excitement mounted and for as long as supplies lasted eclipse-viewing shades took over as the hottest items on the market. Two days before the event,, one leading merchant confirmed that in less than a week, he had sold 30,000 shades . Restaurants, particularly those in the South of the island put on special lunches, some churches organized an eclipse ritual on King George V grounds in Grays Farm, and special parties were organized for the Rising Sun Grounds in St. John's, Betty's Hope, the Interpretation Centre and Shirley Heights.

Cloud cover over St. John's which ruined the full time anticipated view of the once in a lifetime spectacle broke just enough and in time for the darkened sun to appear.

Betty's Hope and the Interpretation Centre turned out to be good viewing sites, but by all accounts, the best picture of the miracle in the sky came through cloudless skies observed from Shirley Heights.

And as a stabbing darkness closed in on the country in the middle of the day, eclipse watchers donned their shades and waited with bated breath. The darkness fell over the land at exactly 2.32PM. And as if on cue, cheers swelled to fill every nook and cranny across the country. Off came the shades and the darkness for the better part of three minutes particularly over Shirley Heights was observed in awe. Never before, never again will so many Antiguan witness what every man woman and child agree was indeed a spectacle to behold. After all the excitement, knots of all of life in the crowds mulled over the sightings. Some spoke of the Diamond Ring (a bright light which appeared around the moon) others were more enthused by the Bailey's Beads (a string of spots of intense light) while others found the Shadow Bands (moving light inches wide in the shade which come through the valleys of the moon) more dramatic.

Barbuda, our sister island, like all of the neighbouring islands with the exception of Montserrat, experienced only a partial eclipse.

Six hours before the island lost the sunlight, Sharmane Jackson of five Islands gave birth to twin boys but the eclipse baby, a bouncing nine pounder came home to Deborah Riley at around ten minutes after the moon made the first contact with the sun.

Meantime Education Minister Bernard Percival has come out with high praise for the Ministries of Health and Information for their Public relations blitz in the days leading up to the eclipse.

