

# AN OVERVIEW OF THE EARLY HISTORY OF METHODISM IN STANN CREEK

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## PREAMBLE

The source for the following account of the history of Methodism in Belize is “The Centenary Number of the Methodist Record—The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine of the Honduras District”, page 9 and under the caption “STANN CREEK”. This section is printed as is, in its entirety.

Two salient points gleaned from this information are that *Methodism was born in Stann Creek District, and Garifuna leaders of that time were among the Church’s first leaders*. These facts have been downplayed in our history. A third point that should be noted is that *Garifuna leaders were very much involved in the leadership of The Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) as according to this article one Mr. G. A. Nunez was president of the local chapter of the UNIA*. Captain Beni and later his son Santiago were magistrates of the village of Stann Creek.

While names of the leaders in Methodism are highlighted in the text, below is a list of some of these persons:

Captain Beni—father of Santiago and grand uncle of Simon Ventura

Santiago Beni—became the first Carib teacher

Theodor Martin—better known as Father Martin and was also Magistrate

G. A. Nunez

Francis Ventura

B. C. Blanco

Florencio Thomas

Simeon N. Ciego

Simon Ventura

Edward Ramirez

Alexander Castro

## THE STORY

The ever flaming Light of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ through the activity of the Wesleyan Methodist Church was first proclaimed in Stann Creek by **Captain Beni, Father of Mr. Santiago Beni (deceased) and Grand Uncle of Mr. Simon Ventura** the oldest member of the Wesleyan Methodist Church alive today, in a little humble hut built of salt water pimento in the year 1828. He having accepted the faith being moved by the spirit through the ministrations of The Rev. William Wedlock in Belize.

Captain Beni a man of valour, of strong personality filled with the power of the Holy Spirit was leader of his people in Ecclesiastical and Political works. **His Political authority having been granted to him by Major General Allen Hampden Pyre then Governor of the Colony who appointed him magistrate of the village.**

His hands were strengthened by the arrival of The Rev. Thomas Edney who laboured hard among and for the people: School and Sewing classes were started into which Mrs. Thomas Edney (wife of the Pastor) threw in her heart and soul thus the foundation of a good and permanent work was laid.

Captain Beni continued his useful work up to the time of his death. **His son Santiago who was at the time in Belize with acting Governor Major Alexander Mc Donald who trained and educated him, sent him down to take over the duties of his father as magistrate of his people.** Santiago followed in the footsteps of his father and was the first Carib School Teacher in the village and maintained perfect order; he afterwards resigned both his political and ecclesiastical duties but remained a Methodist in faith until death.

**Mr. Theodor Martin (generally known as Father Martin) was next appointed magistrate** of the village. He was converted under the ministration of the Rev. Thomas Edney. He and many others assisted Mr. Santiago Beni in building a better house for the worship of the Lord, on the site chosen by his father which remains the Wesleyan Methodist property to this day. Among those worthy of mention in connection with the setting up of the second church building is **Father Jose, Mr. Marcus Ramirez (Father of Captain Edward Ramirez), Francis Ventura (Father of Mr. Simon Ventura) and Mr. Florencio Thomas, husband of Mrs. Maria Sernarda Thomas, aunt of Mr. B. C. O. Blanco, who were then the backbone of Methodism in Stann Creek** and whose offspring have grown up in the church as "Pillars that will go out no more for ever" in answer to their faithful prayers.

The work continued to grow and prospered under a succession of Local Preachers, Laymen and Teachers, with ministerial quarterly visits from Belize, until the appointment of The Rev. James W. Lord who was succeeded by the Rev. T. N. Robert whose stay was shortened owing to the death of his beloved wife.

To the Rev. T. N. Roberts is due the credit of laying the foundation of the filling up of the low lying lands of the Mission promises having to buy mahogany chips and log ends and dump them in places to be filled up many feet.

The Rev. J. B. Nowell was next appointed. He laboured hard and won the love, esteem and respect of all classes of the community both Roman Catholics and Wesleyans alike. The work prospered much in his hands and under his ministration many of the young men gave their hearts to God among whom was **Alexander Castro (deceased), William Benterio, Edward Ramirez and others.** Alexander Castro was shortly after his conversion appointed Teacher in the Sunday School, Assistant Superintendent, and Secretary and finally appointed Local Preacher, in which posts he proved himself worthy

up to time of his death. The love, esteem and respect held for Castro was demonstrated at the time of his death. His funeral was the largest yet witnessed in the Church (which was the third construction built by **Mr. Simon Ventura, Cruz Blanco** and others, and was the building previous to the present Church building) which was packed to overflowing as well as the Church grounds. It was generally felt that the gap caused by the death of Mr. Alexander Castro was difficult to fill, on every hand was heard the words who will fill his place. But soon the people were made to realize the fact that God buried his workmen but carried on his work. The work was the Lord's not for Castro. The spirit of the Lord moved and **Mr. G. A. Nunez was converted**. The spirit manifested itself through this convert, and soon his usefulness was felt. He becomes Sunday School Teacher, Secretary, Assistant Superintendent and Superintendent, Prayer Leader, Society Steward, Poor Steward, Circuit Steward and Local Preacher which positions he held ardently up to recently when he relinquished his activity in the Church **to take up duties in the Universal Negro Improvement Association being appointed President (local) of that body** but is still a Methodist at heart.

During the ministration of the Rev. J. B. Nowell he did much to improve the educational standard of his people aided by the zeal of that memorable Teacher the Rev. Charles Alexander Ottley who together with his zeal in his work and his godly example made lasting impressions on the lives of his pupils some of which have held permanent and responsible positions in life. **Mr. Simeon N. Ciego who was trained and educated by the Rev. C. A. Ottley, Rev. J. B. Nowell and lastly by the Rev. H. H. Labbett was the first Carib Teacher in the Colony who obtained a first class Teacher's Certificate.** Mr. Ciego started teaching as assistant to Mr. C. A. Ottley after which he was sent to take charge of the Northern River Wesleyan School where he taught for many years. His life's influence is still felt by some of those he had taught in that place. Owing to ill health he was transferred to Monkey River Wesleyan School where he taught for a little over a year from thence he was transferred to Stann Creek where he did much good work for the master as Teacher, Local Preacher, Class Leader, Sunday School Superintendent, Church Organist. He worked with ardent zeal up to the time of his death 6<sup>th</sup> July 1916, leaving behind him worthy examples of his labour in the persons of Mr. Garfield Gill, Teacher, and Miss Ethel Brooks now serving with the Salvation Army in Jamaica as Captain.

To the energy of the Rev. J. B. Nowell is due the credit of filling up the low lying lot of the Mission premises, building of the present Mission House, preparing the plan for the building of the present School Room which since has been twice extended and the building of the present Church Building which is now being renovated through the energy of our most beloved and present Pastor the Rev. Joseph Pryor. Much credit is due to the Rev. J. Pryor and we thank Almighty God for the mysterious way He has been helping him and us all in His work.

When one considers the state of the economic conditions of the District at the time he took over the Circuit and compare same with the visible result of his work we cannot but truly say he has done what he could. We pray that the Lord will continue to cause the

light of His countenance to shine upon him and his in their faithful labours for Him and as their days so may their strength be.

We thank God for the work of Methodism in our midst and although she has not rapidly grown here, numerically, yet her spiritual influence has always been strong and wielded to the general good of the Community.