

For Review Only

MUN CHOR SENG

*Those were the Days*

Mun Chor Seng started taking photographs in his teens and over the last six decades has captured many aspects of Singapore. His evocative images, brought together in this timely collection, cover everything from early street scenes to how we used to live, work and play. These photos from the 1950s to the 1970s will evoke happy memories and show the way of life in post-war Singapore.

- Contains over 700 original photographs, many unpublished, and of locations long since demolished
- Captures images of Singapore in the early years of independence
- Features photos of daily living from a period of time long past
- Includes significant events in Singapore history

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PHOTOS BY **MUN CHOR SENG**



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*Those  
were  
the  
Days*

PHOTOS BY **MUN CHOR SENG** 文佐成



**On the front cover** | Singapore city skyline, 1955; you can see the facade of the General Post Office in the background. In those days, people had to take sampans if they wanted to visit the offshore islands.

**On the back cover** | The Causeway linking Singapore to Malaysia, 1963 (top photo). Bottom photos from left to right: laundry drying in the open; water buffaloes in Potong Pasir; morning market in Chinatown; public balloting for HDB flats, 1974.

**Opposite** | Public housing in Queenstown, the first new town built by the HDB.

Photo Editor: Melvin Neo  
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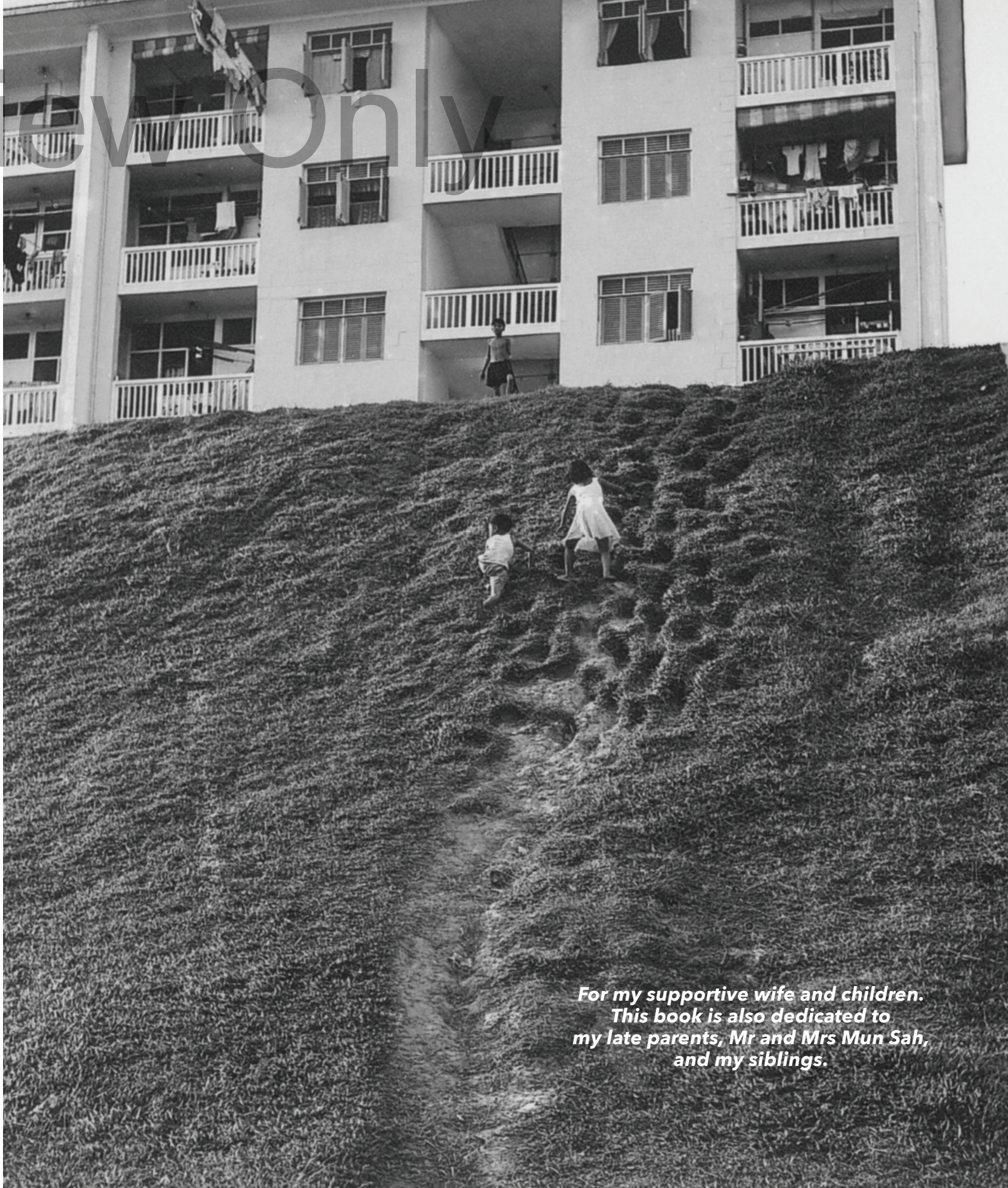
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***For my supportive wife and children.  
This book is also dedicated to  
my late parents, Mr and Mrs Mun Sah,  
and my siblings.***





The Singapore River, February 1963.

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## INTRODUCTION

**Bottom left** | World War II ended in 1945 and a year later Singapore was governed by the British Military Administration (BMA). By 1947, the economy began to recover, and people's lives were slowly getting back to normal. Schools reopened and I was accepted as a student at Monk's Hill Primary School in Winstedt Road. This is my Primary 1 class photo taken in 1947. I am seated in the front row, fifth from left. Some of my classmates were overage due to the backlog of students after the war. This is a special photo for me because it was taken with my classroom in the background. The wall still shows the camouflage coat of paint that was painted during the war years.

**Bottom right** | My schoolmates who were members of the Cub Scouts, 1947.

I was first introduced to still photography when I was a student at Monk's Hill Primary School. This was in 1947 when I was given two photos. The first photo was a group shot taken with my class teacher, Miss Khoo. The other photo was of my classmates who were Cub Scouts, a junior uniformed group of the school. I was fascinated by the photos and have developed the hobby of taking and collecting photos ever since.

In the late 1940s, my eldest brother Chor Koon, who was an avid photographer, acquired a "box camera". He started experimenting with the camera. A box camera was a simple type of camera suitable for beginners. It was made of cardboard or plastic with a lens on one end and film at the other end. The lens was often made as a single element. The camera worked best for bright outdoor scenes as it had a small lens aperture. It was unable to adjust focus and also the films available back then had low sensitivity. Bearing in mind these limitations,



Signboard for Red Lion, a soft drink manufactured by Fraser and Neave (F&N), at Airport Road, going towards Paya Lebar Airport.





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my brother started his photography hobby. The box camera used negative film with 12 exposures for each roll. I was his assistant and also his model while he used the camera. His early photos were taken in the vicinity of Newton Circus where we lived.

From 1947 to 1951, Chor Koon attended Yeung Ching Chinese School in Club Street. Mr Kouo Shang Wai, a well-known cameraman then, was on the teaching staff of the school. After school, whenever possible, my brother would patronise the photo shops in Chinatown. Fee Fee Photographic Store at 160 Cross Street was one of his favourites. He was very passionate about photography. He was always keen to learn and upgrade himself, keeping abreast with the ever-changing developments in photography.

Chor Koon completed his Chinese Junior School in 1951 and assisted my father in his watch-repair business in Newton. After years of working, he managed to save enough and bought a 35mm professional camera. During the early 1950s, my younger brother Chor Weng and I enrolled for Evening Classes at Yeung Ching. We used to bring enlarged prints from Chor Koon to show Mr Kouo for his comments. Back home, we would convey Mr Kouo's comments to Chor Koon so that he could improve his work.

Chor Koon became a member of the Singapore Camera Club at the end of 1953. The club was then located in Pheng Geck Avenue in a double-storey terrace house. There was some simple lighting equipment set up on the upper floor for members to use for indoor shots. The darkroom on the ground floor was equipped with simple facilities – a red safe light, three chemical trays for developing prints and an enlarger. A print drier machine was available to dry the prints. I used to assist my brother when he made a booking to use the darkroom on Saturdays from 7:30pm to 9:30pm. It was an unforgettable experience working in the darkroom as the ventilation was poor and there was no air-conditioning.

**Below** | My eldest brother Chor Koon started helping dad in his watch-repair business after completing his studies.

**Opposite top** | I joined the pioneer cohort of Beatty Secondary School in 1954. I am standing in the back row, second from the right. In the back row, fifth from left is Wilson David who would later become known as "Singapore's Elvis Presley". Andrew Fong Sip Chee, who later became the Member of Parliament for Chai Chee, is second from right in the middle row.

**Opposite bottom** | A photo I took of child actress Fung Po Po when she visited Radio Singapore was published in the *Nanyang Radio Weekly* magazine. They paid me \$3 to use the image.



In 1954, the club became known as The Photographic Society of Singapore. It moved to Cashin Street, next to Odeon Theatre. I was inspired to take up photography by my eldest brother Chor Koon. I joined the club in 1955 and took part in their Sunday location outings – with him – to different parts of Singapore.

I joined the pioneer cohort of Beatty Secondary School in 1954 and was part of the first batch of students who spent all four years of secondary school there. I was the school photographer during my years there.



In 1958, after I completed my secondary school education, I started work as a Broadcasting Assistant in Radio Malaya Singapore. In the middle of the year, the department requested staff to submit photos of our new outdoor broadcasting studio at the Singapore Constitutional Exhibition in Kallang. Two of the photos that I submitted were selected for display. Later, these two photos were published in the popular Chinese *Nanyang Radio Weekly* magazine. This was a sideline for me and I was paid \$3 for every photo they used. This was a princely sum as the monthly salary for a broadcasting assistant back then was \$171. The additional income helped me defray my living expenses and kept my photography hobby going. I was able to provide photographs to the *TV & Radio Chinese Magazine* which had just been established in February 1963.



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In November 1962, I applied for and was given the post of Assistant Film Cameraman in Television Singapura. My first major project was the TV Singapura documentary, *The Formation of Malaysia*. Over the years, I had opportunities to travel all over the world for work. This included ASEAN countries and further locations such as The People's Republic of China, Africa, Europe, United States and USSR.

My most memorable trip was the 1964 Malaysian Mission to 17 countries in Africa led by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. That trip was made on a chartered Swiss Belair Airlines plane and it was a 37-day visit to explain the formation of Malaysia. There was a second trip to Africa after we were asked to leave Malaysia. The second trip was known as Singapore Mission to Africa and it was to explain why we were no longer part of Malaysia.

**Above |** Camera crew and reporters who were covering nomination day for the Singapore General Elections in 1968.



**Left |** A three-man filming crew travelled from Singapore to Penang on 13 August 1965 to cover the Malaysian Solidarity Convention. We left Penang on 16 August 1965 to return to Singapore and had a stopover at the Kuala Lumpur Railway Station where this photo was taken. I looked after the luggage and filming equipment while my two colleagues had their lunch.

**Right |** One of the most memorable work trips was the 37-day Malaysian Mission to Africa in 1964.



The Singapore delegation was led by Dr Toh Chin Chye, then Deputy Prime Minister, together with Mr S Rajaratnam, then Foreign Minister. Those were interesting times that I was privileged to have lived through and to have had the opportunity to capture on film such moments of history. Another important event was the admission of Singapore to the United Nations in New York in September 1965. Singapore became one of the 117 members in the family of nations.

I retired in December 1998 after working for 40 years on Caldecott Hill. My last position was as Head of Location Operations. After retirement, I continued to work with images of history as part of the team at the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (SYSNMH) from 2001 to 2006. I travelled to Malaysia, China, Hong Kong, Thailand and Taiwan tracing Dr Sun's time in this region and collected more images to record history. In 2004, part of the SYSNMH collection travelled overseas for an exhibition to five cities. It started with Hong Kong, then moved to Guangzhou, Nanjing and Shanghai,



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before it ended in Taipei. A 30-minute documentary featuring the highlights of the overseas exhibition was produced.

Some retired Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) colleagues formed a group known as Caldecott Old Timers (COTS). This group meets occasionally for chit-chats and merrymaking. During one of the meetings, Belinda Sunshine (Yeo) suggested that we should write a book to share memories of working life at Caldecott Hill. All the COTS unanimously agreed that Philip Tay Joo Thong should lead the book project. Five other COTS – Joan Chee, Raymond Anthony Fernando, Belinda Sunshine, Horace Wee and I – spontaneously offered to tell our stories for the book.

In February 2018, the first meeting took place at Thomson Plaza Food Court and this group charted out the book. After 18 months of hard work by the team led by a most enthusiastic Philip Tay, we were able to produce the book successfully. The book, entitled *ON AIR: Untold Stories from Caldecott Hill*, was published by Marshall Cavendish and was launched in July 2019 at the new Mediacorp Campus. Over the years, I contributed many photos on matters concerning radio and



**Top |** A visit to Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (SYSNMH) organised by Beatty Alumni, 2003. Past and present Beattyians on an outing together.

**Above |** The first meeting in February 2018 of the *On Air: Untold Stories from Caldecott Hill* book team at Thomson Plaza Food Court. From left: Raymond Fernando, Belinda Sunshine, Philip Tay, Horace Wee, Joan Chee and myself (standing).



**Left |** At the printers with co-author Philip Tay (centre) and Melvin Neo from Marshall Cavendish (right) checking the printed proofs for *On Air*.

**Right |** The Beatty Secondary School Heritage Wall shows the history of the school starting from 1953 with a portrait of Admiral Sir David Beatty. Other photos outside the school's heritage gallery show significant milestones. The display is organised by decades and highlights key events with photos and captions.



television which were published in books, magazines and the SBC newsletters.

In the early 1990s, I donated a large collection of my photos and artefacts collected during my school days to the Beatty Heritage Gallery. I am one of the top contributors to the Singapore Memory Portal, which is dedicated to preserving memories of yesteryear. With all my involvement in photography, I thought that it would be beneficial to produce a pictorial book based on my collections of photos. The book would be of interest to a wide range of readers in Singapore. Hopefully it will also bring back nostalgic memories for older Singaporeans. For the younger generation, it might be interesting for them to see what Singapore was like then and how much we have progressed from the early years of independent Singapore.

I am most grateful to Philip Tay and Melvin Neo for their encouragement and guidance, without which this book would not have been possible to complete, perhaps even in record time.



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Part 2

## AROUND SINGAPORE





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## POTONG PASIR



Potong Pasir is located off Upper Serangoon Road in the central region of Singapore. “Potong pasir” literally means “cut sand” in Malay, not surprisingly as the area was occupied by sand quarries in the early 20th century. The mining of sand resulted in four ponds being formed, later reduced to two after massive flooding. Eventually the ponds were used as fishing farms and fishing also began to be associated with Potong Pasir.

The land in Potong Pasir was very fertile and from the early days, it was Singapore’s key vegetable farming area. Farmers cultivated leafy vegetables such as watercress using traditional methods. They also planted coconut palms. Most of the farms were family-run and the land was leased from the government. Families lived in attap houses with zinc roofs. As the area was low-lying, it was very prone to floods. When this happened, the villagers would take refuge at the nearby St Andrew’s School which was located on higher ground.

**Top left** | The entrance to Potong Pasir Village from Upper Serangoon Road, 1960.

**Top middle** | Dressed in their Sunday best are a family friend, Mrs Eric (seated) with her son (on her lap) and her sister.

**Top right** | You can see the minaret of the Alkaff Mosque at the top left of the photo, just across the mining pond.

**Opposite page** | The mining ponds at Potong Pasir Village were home to many water buffaloes.





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In the 1950s, the area was modernised with the construction of a bridge across the ponds and the building of a village community centre. Piped water and electricity were also introduced in the 1960s.

By the 1970s, the land was acquired by the government for redevelopment and most of the villagers moved away. Construction for the public housing estate of Potong Pasir commenced in the 1980s and was completed a few years later. Until today, the sloping roofs of the blocks facing the Central Expressway (CTE) remain a landmark of Potong Pasir.

Potong Pasir constituency was a stronghold of the Opposition in Singapore. In 1984, Mr Chiam See Tong representing the Singapore Democratic Party became the elected Member of Parliament. He represented the people until 2011 when ill health prevented him from standing for re-election.

St Andrew's School is still located in Potong Pasir and the campus has expanded. Known as St Andrew's Village today, it provides education from pre-school to pre-university level.

**Bottom left** | My brother Chor Koon with a view across the mining ponds showing homes located at the water's edge.

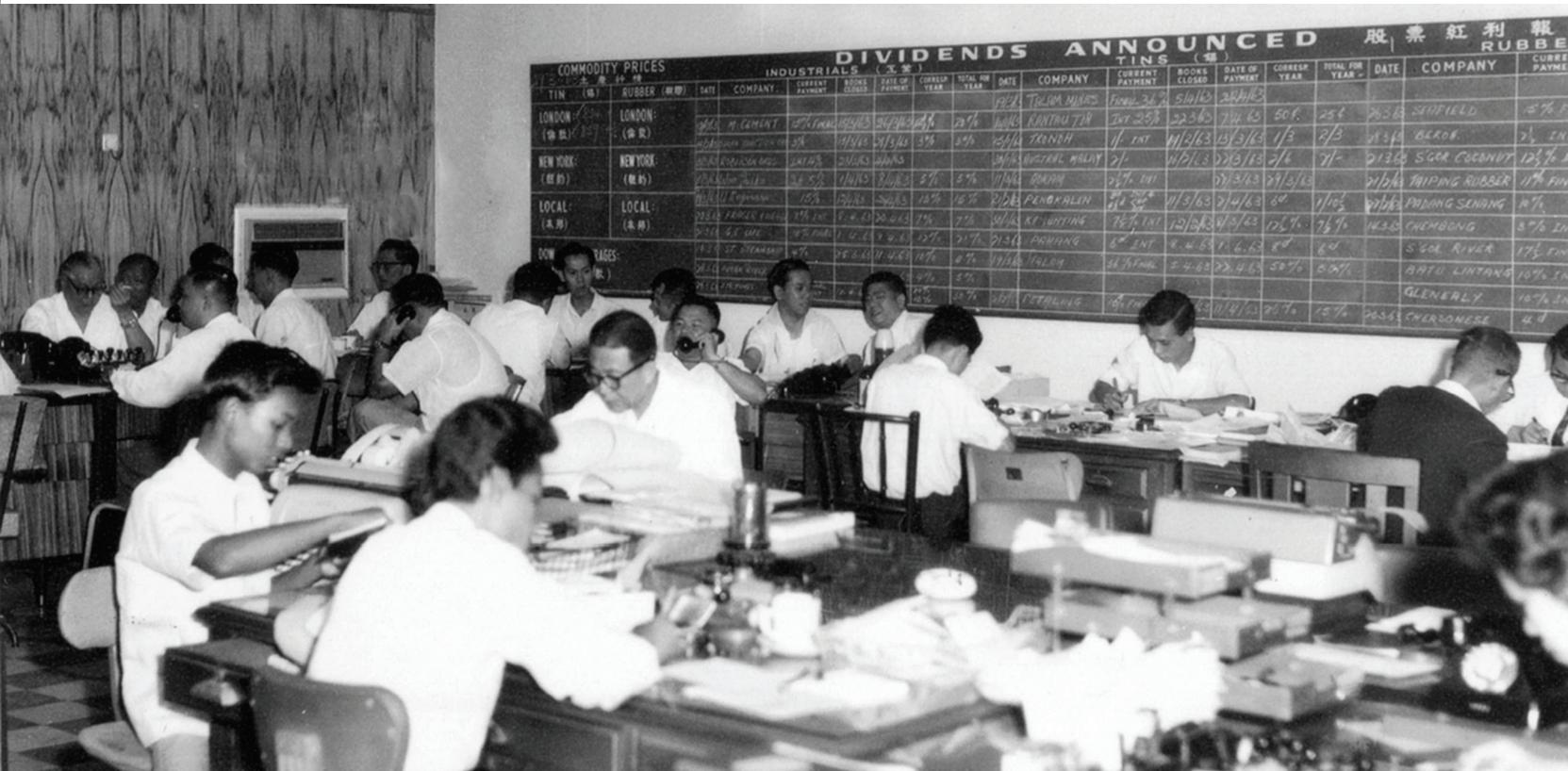
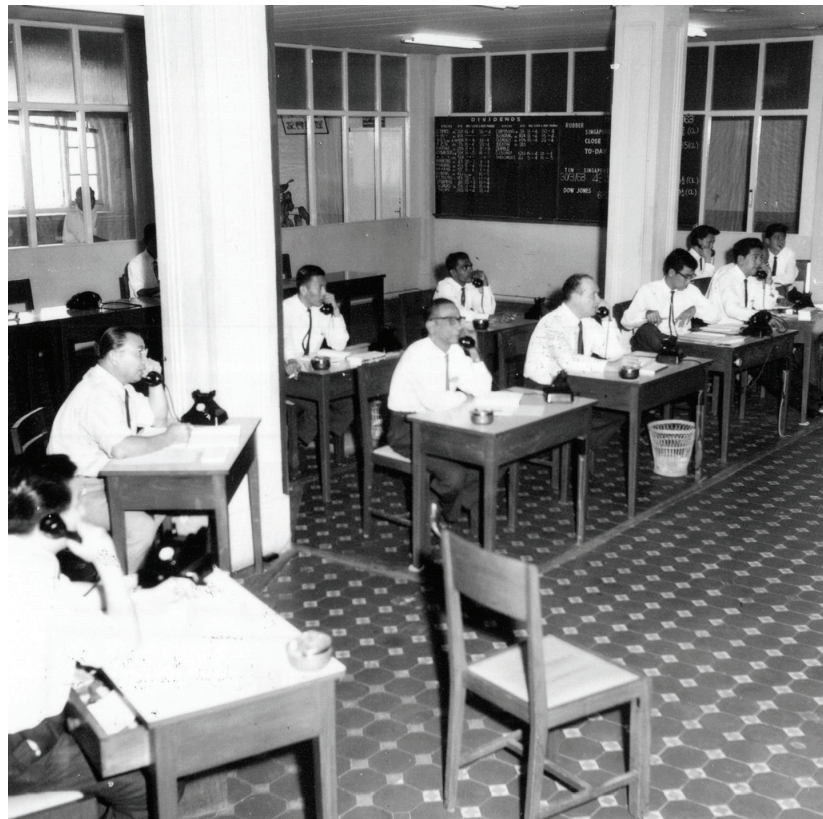
**Below, bottom right and opposite page** | Potong Pasir Village with its coconut trees where the people led a quiet rural life: farming, rearing ducks, fishing and raising water buffaloes. Fishing nets were set up in the mining pond to catch fish.





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## THE STOCK EXCHANGE



These photos from April 1963 show the Singapore Trading Room of the Malayan Stock Exchange. Malaya and Singapore used to have a shared stock exchange company. In 1973, with the termination of currency interchangeability between Malaysia and Singapore, the Stock Exchange of Malaysia and Singapore (SEMS) separated into the Singapore Stock Exchange (SES) and Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange Bhd (KLSEB).

**Above** | Entries were written on the trading board with chalk as trades were called in by the remisiers.

**Opposite page** | Remisiers sat facing the trading board to check the latest bid prices. As everything had to be done manually in those days, the stockbroking companies engaged a bevy of support staff.



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## OUT AND ABOUT



In the following 12 pages, we see various scenes of Singapore including the Colonial buildings in what is now termed the Civic District. We also travel further afield to look at key landmarks and other places that were a part of a Singaporean's daily life.

**Above** | Built in 1923, the 1.05-km long Causeway is a road and rail link across the Johor Straits and connects Singapore and Johor Bahru in Malaysia. Photo taken in 1963. The Causeway was widened several times in 1964 and 1976, and again from 1989 to 1991, to accommodate the growing traffic.

**Opposite** | These flats beside the Kallang River at Kampong Kayu Road were newly built in 1965. You can see Block 9 (at the front) and 8 (partially blocked) with Block 1 on the left.





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**Opposite top** | View of Victoria Memorial Hall, Victoria Theatre and its clock tower from the roof of the General Post Office. In the rear is the Supreme Court with its majestic dome. The Dalhousie Obelisk (front left), erected in 1851, was the first public statue in Singapore.

**Opposite bottom** | View from City Hall across St Andrew's Road. The open field is the Padang which has played host to sports such as rugby, cricket and tennis, as well as National Day Parades. Behind the Padang is the Singapore Cricket Club (partly hidden by the trees). In the rear, you can just see the clock tower of the Victoria Memorial Hall.

**Above** | Aerial view of Clifford Pier and its surroundings. Clifford Pier was a landing point for immigrants and other sea passengers arriving in Singapore.

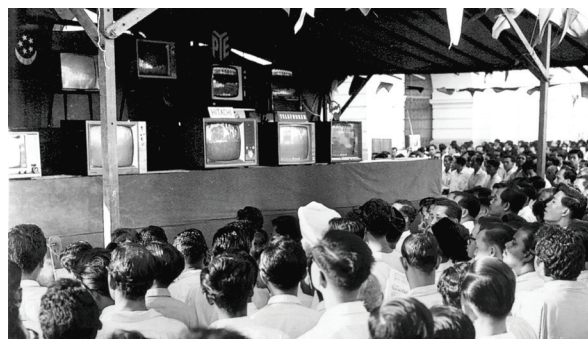
**Left** | This photo was taken from the rooftop of the General Post Office (now Fullerton Hotel). There was a police post inside Clifford Pier. Parking was free, even in the CBD, in those days and there was a big car park next to Clifford Pier. The top of the photo shows the Customs Harbour Division HQ and Telok Ayer Basin. Part of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Building is on the right of the photo.



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Part 3

## SOCIAL LIFE & PEOPLE





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## INAUGURATION OF TV IN SINGAPORE



Singapore's first television station, Television Singapura, was inaugurated on 15 February 1963 by then Minister for Culture Mr S Rajaratnam. Some 300 guests attended the event which was held at the Victoria Memorial Hall. Television sets had been set up outside the venue and also at 52 community centres islandwide so that members of the public could be part of this important occasion. In his opening address, Mr Rajaratnam said that "tonight might well mark the start of a social and cultural revolution in our lives".



**Top left** | View from the stage inside the Victoria Memorial Hall as invited guests wait for the Minister of Culture to inaugurate television service in Singapore.

**Top right and opposite page** | Members of the public throng the forecourt of the Victoria Memorial Hall where the government had set up television sets so they could also be part of the event.





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## THE DHOBI



In the early days of Singapore, not everyone had easy access to clean water and families would send their dirty laundry, especially large items like bed linen, to the dhobi to be washed and ironed. “Dhobi” was the Hindi word for “washerman”, usually Indian, who provided this service. The dirty items were washed and hung out to dry in the open before being folded or ironed and starched as per the instructions given.

**Above** | My neighbour ran a Cantonese dhobi shop. The lone worker came from China. He had little education but was hard-working. Customers sent their soiled linen to the shop for cleaning. This was washed manually in a pool at the back of the shop. Later, the wet linen would be put in a big rattan basket on a push cart and taken to be hung out to dry in an open space.



**Top** | Some drying areas were more secure than others as fences were erected to prevent people from stealing the laundry.

**Bottom left** | Line after line of clothing flapping gently as the laundry dried under the hot sun. This is Beatty Road and you can see the SIT flats in the background.

**Bottom right** | Worker hanging out the washing to dry.



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## WEDDINGS



In the 1960s, weddings in Singapore were more modern than previously and the bride and groom often wore western-style clothing. However cultural traditions still prevailed such as a tea ceremony for elders. Another traditional custom was to shelter the bride with an umbrella to ward off negative elements.

**Top left** | The bridal party of Mr and Mrs Francis Ho made their way out of the bride's home in Sago Street. Note the opened umbrella which was meant to ward off bad omens according to local customs, 1962.

**Top right** | Travelling to the wedding banquet in style.

**Opposite top row** | A family portrait and serving tea as a mark of respect to elders.

**Opposite bottom row** | Family and friends attending the wedding banquet. It was customary to toast the bride and groom with shouts of "Yum Seng!" meaning "bottoms up".





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## HIGH COURTS

## PASSPORTS



The High Courts (as the Supreme Court was known as then) had a five-foot way facing High Street. There were six exhibition panels nailed to the High Court wall during the early 1960s. The Ministry of Culture would provide Government News photos for general public viewing, updating the images on a fortnightly basis.

**Left |** Members of the public looking at the exhibition panels.

**Right |** The High Court was a convenient meeting place as it was centrally located and people could wait in the cool and shady five-foot way.

Not many people had passports in the early years of independence as travel was not common. By virtue of my work, I was required to travel and was probably one of the few people who had three different passports: a Chinese passport issued in 1948, a British Singapore Passport issued in 1962 and a Singapore Provisional Passport issued in 1965.

**Above |** Here I am at the Fred Astaire Dance Studio in New York, one of the many places I visited during my travels, 1965.



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## 1963 GENERAL ELECTIONS



RIVER VALLEY 里峇谷里		
CANDIDATE	SYMBOL	NO. OF VOTES
CHUNG KIT WONG 黃仲傑		455
GOH LAM SAN 吳南山		2668
LIM CHENG LOCK 林清祿		5597
YAP PHENG GECK 葉平五		1156

PARTIES	NO. OF CANDIDATES	SEATS WON
	51	37
	46	13
	42	
	46	1
INDEPENDENTS	16	
OTHERS	9	



On 21 September 1963, general elections were held in Singapore to elect representatives for the 51 seats in the Singapore Legislative Assembly. Eight parties and a handful of independents contested the elections. It was a victory for the People's Action Party which contested all the seats, winning 37 of them for a two-thirds majority.

**This page |** Results from the live coverage of the elections at the Victoria Memorial Hall. Back then the graphics was simple and the tallies were written with chalk on pre-printed cards and flashed on the screen.

**Opposite |** A Silat performance during a walkabout in Kaki Bukit Constituency to garner support for the 1963 General Elections.





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## IN TAWAU, SABAH



In December 1964, I was sent on assignment to the jungles of Tawau, in Sabah, to work on the documentary *Confrontasi*. Besides the confrontation, the documentary also highlighted logging and the production of jute products. The television crew was accompanied by a group of soldiers from the Malaysian army for protection as filming took place close to the Indonesian border in Tawau.



**Left** | Cameraman captured the deforested areas for the documentary.

**Right** | As there were illegal loggers in the area, the crew was accompanied by soldiers for protection.

**Opposite top** | Producer S C Lim doing a stand-upper commentary in a logging camp in Tawau.

**Opposite bottom left** | I held on tightly to the mounted TV camera as we travelled by boat along the river to Pulau Sebatik.

**Opposite bottom right** | Production crew in a discussion at the airfield in Tawau.





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**Top left** | We crossed the river on a bamboo raft in Sabah on 21 June 1963. Cameraman Nair and consultant David Prior stood at one end as the driver and guide stood at the other end of the half-submerged raft to maintain balance.

**Top right** | David Prior and producer Kajapathy helped to carry the equipment while filming on location in Sabah.

**Left** | A Kandazan dance in Sabah.

**Above** | The cut logs being floated down the river in Sabah.



**Above** | This is Jesselton, the capital of British North Borneo. After joining Malaysia, it became known as Kota Kinabalu.

**Left** | Cameraman M K Nair took a lighting exposure meter reading as producer Kajapathy interviewed Mr Donald Steven, Chief Minister of Sabah, at his residence. The man in the background is Loo Koon Fun from Chinese News.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mun Chor Seng has been armed with a camera since his youth. Born in 1938, he was inspired to take up photography by his eldest brother and became the school photographer at Beatty Secondary School during his

years of study there. His professional career began in 1958 at the Department of Broadcasting, Radio & Television Singapore (RTS) as it was known then. Later RTS became the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) and eventually Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS). Through his work there, he had the privilege of witnessing history through the lens of a television cameraman.

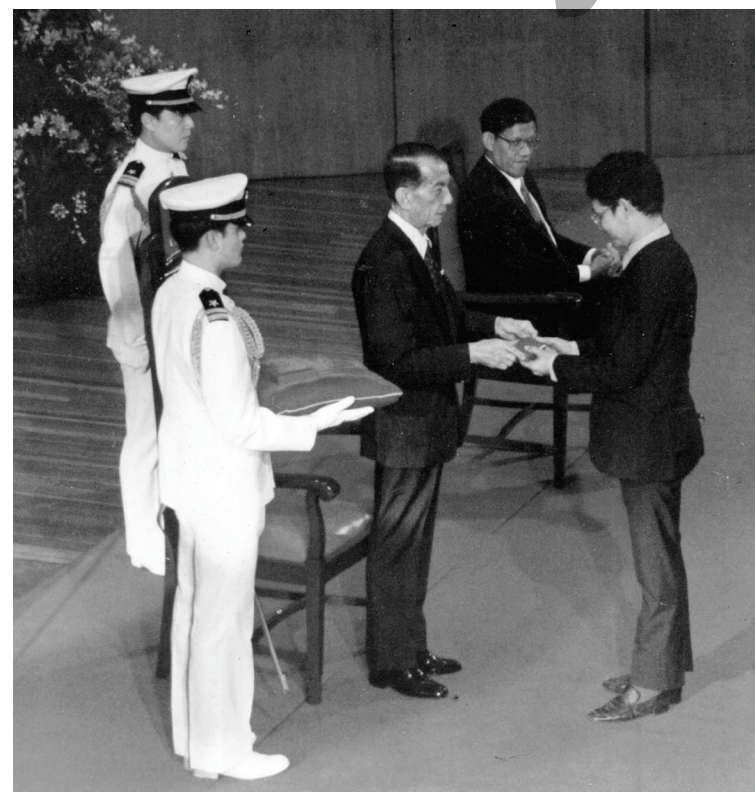
Mun was part of the television camera crew that accompanied Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, and Deputy Prime Minister Dr Toh Chin Chye and Mr S Rajaratnam on official visits during the early days of the establishment of Singapore. Those were interesting times that he feels privileged to have lived in, and more so, to have had the opportunity to capture moments of history on film. One such event was the admission of Singapore to the United Nations in New York in September 1965 as one of the 117 members in the family of nations.

In July 1973, he was attached to the News Division of Visnews, BBC TV and ITV in London for the Colour Conversion Course. He also attended the Cine Camera Television Camera Lighting Course at Sender Fries Berlin in West Germany in 1977. He was awarded the Efficiency Medal at the 1980 National Day Awards.

Mun retired in 1998 after working for 40 years with TCS. He continued to work with images of history as part of the pioneer team of the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall from 2001 to 2006. This period saw him travelling to Malaysia, China, Hong Kong, Thailand and Taiwan, retracing Dr Sun's time in this region and collecting more images of history. To date, he has visited every continent with the exception of South America.

A well-respected photographer and video cameraman, Mun has contributed many of his photos to books on broadcasting published in Singapore. He is well-known among the heritage community and is one of the top contributors to the Singapore Memory Portal dedicated to preserving yesteryear memories.

Mun is also a co-author of *On Air: Untold Stories from Caldecott Hill*, a collection of 51 essays by the pioneering staff of the national broadcasting station. He contributed most of the photos in the book, which traces the development and growth of the company in tandem with that of Singapore.



**Top left** | I received the Efficiency Medal from President Benjamin Sheares at the 1980 National Day Awards.

**Top right** | Senior civil servant Herman R Hochstadt and I at Moscow's Red Square after watching the 48th Anniversary Great October Socialist Revolution Parade, October 1965.



**Left** | At the burial area inside the Pyramid of Giza, Cairo. From left to right: me, Alex Josey, Egyptian tour guide, Teo Ban Hock, H R Hochstadt, Andre Tsang. October 1965.