GEORGE PEET, who went to Kuala Lumpur more than 30 years ago to open the first office of The Straits Times in the Peninsula, reflects on some remarkable changes that have taken place.

I WONDER whether there is any city in the world where 30 years have made so much difference as in Kuala Lumpur. I went to the capital of the old Federation in 1929 to open a branch office for The Straits Times and lived there for four years, the first Singapore journalist to be stationed in the Federated Malay States.

When I revisited the Federal Capital of today there were naturally many surprises, but the one that really set me back was to hear my hostess say on the evening of my arrival that she had been caught in the five o’clock traffic jam in the Batu Road bottleneck.

I saw in a flash how Kuala Lumpur had grown and changed. In my day it was a quiet, leisurely, tranquil town. Coming from the commercial capital of Singapore, from the bustle of Raffles Place and the traffic of Collyer Quay, the air of dignified, unhurried calm that lay over Kuala Lumpur induced a different mood at once.

It was the difference between an English cathedral city and, say, Liverpool. But the sunny serenity of Kuala Lumpur, drowsing in the heat of the Selangor plain beneath the mountain wall of the main range, was that of a Malayan country town rather than a city. In official life this lingers on in the Federation today in such green backwaters as the tembusu-covered hill where the Government business of Seremban is carried on.

For the Chinese community, Kuala Lumpur in the days of the F.M.S. was a busy trading centre, serving the planting and mining districts, but from the European point of view it was almost entirely an official capital, a little Washington or Canberra.
Nearly everybody one met in Government service, rigidly graded, socially and otherwise, the Malay Civil Service having a position and status quite distinct from that of the professional and technical departments and being known as the Heaven-born accordingly.

The British commercial community was a very small one, a few big agency houses making up most of it. Paradoxically, the British capitalist had less influence with the stiff-necked British administrators of the F.M.S. than he has with the nationalist government of today.

The European community of Kuala Lumpur in those days was purely a civilian one. There were no army or air force establishments nearer than Singapore. The only regular troops in the Federation were the Burma Rifles in Taling. The first company of the Malay Regiment was about to be formed at Port Dickson. Apart from the F.M.S. Police and their colourful band, the only military ceremonial that the Federal Capital ever saw was provided by the F.M.S. Volunteer Regiment, a European unit, and the Malay Volunteer Infantry, of which each State had its own battalion.

Perhaps you now see why the five o'clock jam in the Batu Road bottleneck opened my eyes: the volume of traffic that implied amazed me. I never had any trouble in parking my car all day long outside my office in Java Street; and it was the same in Jalan Raja and Old Market Square.

I remember when the Malay pointsman at the end of the Java Street bridge first appeared with white wings attached to his shoulders, to relieve him from the fatigue of hand signals. As he turned, his wings turned with him. Imagine trying to control traffic with that quaint device, standing under a conical sunshade mounted on a movable wooden pillar, at that vortex of the Federal Capital today.

The Java Street office in which I toiled single-handed for The Straits Times and The Sunday Times — a six-day week, right up to the sporting events on the Padang on Saturday afternoons — was a dark, stuffy back room up a steep flight of stairs. It looked out at the back on Malay Street, a colourful lane where open-air traders of every kind were strung along the bank of the muddy Gombak River under a canopy of old rain-trees.

Why do Malayan towns so lightly change the old names? Java Street went back to the beginnings of Kuala Lumpur. Likewise Grove Road in Singapore, which also was robbed of its old name to honour Lord Mountbatten, was a link with Grove Estate and the Dunman family of early days. Looking out from my Kuala Lumpur office, I was reminded that what Java Street used to be before Western commerce arrived, Malay Street still was.

My hostess took me much farther back than my own time when she spoke of Bata Road. When I worked in Kuala Lumpur I knew an old lady who had lived there since the headquarters of British administration were moved from Klang to the new State capital in 1876. She was Mrs. Robson, wife of J.H.M. Robson, himself a Selangor old-timer, but he was her second husband; her first had been Captain Syers, the first superintendent of police in Selangor. He was a noted big-game hunter and was killed by a seidang.

One evening, talking with her on the verandah of their vast old house on the brow of Weld Hill (it has vanished long since, with the virgin jungle behind it), she told me that when she and Captain Syers first moved to Kuala Lumpur they lived in an attap bungalow, built high above the ground on posts, on the Bluff, the high ground above the Padang; and one night a wild elephant came out of the jungle in Batu Road, crossed the Padang, climbed the slope and walked right underneath their house.

FROM that recollection to the five o'clock traffic jam, the whole span of Kuala Lumpur history is covered by what I have seen for myself and what I heard from the old-timers who were still there 30 years ago.

Among the Malays there were old men who had been boys when young Frank Swettenham was sent by Governor Sir Andrew Clarke to live in the stockade at Bandar Langat in 1874, and who remembered Captain Bloomfield Douglas, the British Resident who figures in Mrs. Innes's moving record of her lonely life at Bandar Langat as the first white woman in Selangor, "The Chersinese With the Gilt Off" (Captain Bloomfield Douglas's previous post had been a similar one at Darwin — a link with Australia which is probably unknown in Kuala Lumpur today).

Mr. Robson took one back to the old days too. He had been a district officer in Selangor before the State joined the first Federation in 1896. He remembered the British coffee planters from Ceylon and the first rubber boom (with its decimation of Indian labour forces by malaria), and travel by bridle-track and river, and the first motor car and the
opening of the railway from Klang to Kuala Lumpur.
He founded the Selangor Journal — the beginning of journalism in Kuala Lumpur — and later The Malay Mail. He ended his days in the Sime Road internment camp, like many another old-timer of pre-war Malaya.
The Malay Mail, still serving central Malaya in the Straits Times Group, is J.H.M. Robson’s memorial. Robson House, extended and modernised now accommodates the headquarters of the Straits Times Press (Malaya) Ltd.

What impressed me most when I saw the Kuala Lumpur of today was the spread of new suburbs, and, of course, the satellite town of Petaling Jaya. In my day the newly-built Circular Road marked the outer limit of suburbia. But the differences were more in atmosphere and outlook than in area and population, in the intangible things rather than the material ones.

The political horizon of Kuala Lumpur in those days was bounded by Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang (and on that horizon were two State capitals that have since lost that status, Taiping and Kuala Lapis).

We talked and thought only in terms of the F.M.S. Hard though this is to believe now, there was no sense of Malayan unity in Kuala Lumpur then, not even any forewarning of what was to come. Sir Cecil Clementi, as Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner for the Malay States, tried to open people’s eyes to his own vision of “a brotherhood of Malay nations”, but he got nowhere. The Unfederated Malay States remained suspicious and aloof.

Kedah, with its tight system of Malay rule and its European planting community, was a remote little world of its own. North-east Malaya was even more remote and less known, though the East Coast Railway ended in 1932 the age-old isolation of Kelantan and Trengganu during the north-east monsoon. Johore, politically as well as geographically, was a long way from Kuala Lumpur, and had every intention of keeping its distance.

Most remarkable of all, in retrospect, seems the mutual ignorance and indifference of the F.M.S. and the Straits Settlements. It was extraordinary how little Singapore and Kuala Lumpur knew of each other’s affairs. The newspapers gave only the scantiest of news from the respective capitals. There was no demand for such news, no Malayan outlook to promote such a demand.

I like to think that that small office which The Straits Times then opened in Kuala Lumpur sowed the first seeds of the pan-Malayan mind that is taken for granted today, in Singapore as well as in the Federation. But the news coverage of the smaller towns and villages of the Peninsula that seems so remarkable to a journalistic has been in the present-day Straits Times is purely a development of the years since World War II.
The pinnacles of the social order in Kuala Lumpur in my day were Carcosa, the residence of the Chief Secretary, and, below that, the British Residency, but these were political symbols as well. The form of government was authoritarian British rule behind a Malay facade — an arrangement which was not free from hypocrisy.
The town was administered by a body unpleasantly named the Kuala Lumpur Sanitary Board. Few people took any interest in the Sanitary Board or had any clear notion of what it did, in marked contrast with the older city of Singapore, which had civic pride and a strong and progressive municipality.

The Straits Times office of 1929 looked out on Malacca Street, with stalls under rain trees.
Robson House, left, built by Mr. J. H. M. Robson, founder of The Malay Mail, is now headquarters of The Straits Times Group.

Kuala Lumpur was already a town of 100,000 people, but it was so new that it was only just beginning to find itself in the civic sense. The whole place was run like a Government department with the Sanitary Board kept under close control by the British Resident.

The B.R., as he was known in the jargon of the day, was all-powerful within his own State, except in Malay affairs. He was assisted by a State Council, but the meetings of this body were not even reported in the Press. There was a Mentri Besar, but he was in the shadows too.

The Federal Council, the central legislature of the F.M.S., met every three months in the old Council Chamber in Jalan Raja, sometimes at even longer intervals, and was controlled by a Government majority when it did meet. So much for democracy in the old Federation.

One remembers with pleasure, however, the stiff rustling silks and ancient pomp in Jalan Raja when the four Rulers arrived to attend the meetings of the Federal Council (later, only once a year for the principal session).

Life in Kuala Lumpur in those days was very pleasant in some ways, very dull and limited in others. If one wanted to go out to dinner, and did not want to eat at the railway station, the main hotel was the gloomy little Empire Hotel at the back of the Selangor Club.

One could also get a cheap and excellent meal at the Japanese restaurants in the shophouses of Petaling Street. On Saturday nights one went to a small cinema in Brickfields Road or another one in Batu Road.

Professional concerts and shows were unknown. It did not pay touring artists to come up from Singapore. Cultural life was in fact almost nil. There was no public library for the English-educated Asian, although...
Selangor in those days had its own hill station, Bukit Kutu, where three bungalows were perched 2,000 feet up above a sea of jungle that was a game reserve. This resort was reached by a jungle path from the old Kuala Kubu, then in the last stages of being buried by mining silt while Kuala Kubu Bahru was being built a few miles away. Bukit Kutu was closed down during the great slump of 1931-33, and, so far as I know, its bungalows have been swallowed up by the jungle ever since.

Still to be seen on top of the ridge at Klang Gates were the remains of the Government holiday bungalow to which Europeans used to drive out from Kuala Lumpur in the early days. Legend had it that this had been a favourite hideout of a senior Government official and his paramours in local society.

The cool heights of Ginting Simpah, one of Selangor’s two passes over the main range, were another haunt of ours, and the little wooden resthouse was still upkept there, although no longer needed in the motor age. A number of the old resthouses and halting bungalows, spaced at short intervals for horse travel, survived in the F.M.S. until the economy axe fell on them in the slump.

Fraser’s Hill had been opened less than ten years when I first went to Kuala Lumpur, and Cameron Highlands had not even been heard of. Fraser’s Hill was intended to be exclusively a European health resort, and I remember being asked by a Chinese member of the Federal Council whether I thought he and another leading Asian resident of Kuala Lumpur would be unwelcome if they went to the Government resthouse at Fraser’s Hill for a weekend. As it turned out, they were not rebuffed, but the uncertainty in their minds was eloquent of the privileged status of the white community in colonial times, though, in the Malay protectorates, European attitudes were always more considerate and sensitive than in the Straits Settlements.

It was a troubled and controversial time that I lived through in Kuala Lumpur. The great slump was something that we hope will never hit the world again. The political strife over efforts to loosen the grip of the central government and restore State rights in the old Federation perhaps has its warning for the new one. Above all, the verbal battles over the conflicting claims of the Malays and the Malayan, a new issue in the F.M.S., which came to a head during those years, may be said to have cleared the ground for the Alliance Government of today.

Kuala Lumpur grew between the world wars but remained essentially the same up to the Japanese occupation. It was the centralisation of Malayan administration by the British regime after the war that made the basic change in Kuala Lumpur, and the transfer of Malayan Command from Singapore changed the character of the place too.

In the early years after the war one was aware of a new surging growth, a quickened tempo of life, and horizons extending to the Siamese border and the Straits of Johore. Now that Kuala Lumpur is the capital of a democratic national government, is shedding its traditional dependence upon Singapore in commerce and finance, and is developing a rich and varied cultural life, with its own university, the metamorphosis of the old Federal Capital is complete.
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