

Ipoh during two wars and after

As the slump receded, war came to Ipoh. With liberation, a new jungle war began. Only after the Emergency did Ipoh really begin to develop again

by H.C.M. Paul

IPOH, the throbbing, growing capital of tin, rubber and iron rich Perak, is now enjoying an unprecedented era of massive development that is impressive not only for the rate of progress, but also for its all-embracing nature.

It was only about 12 years ago that Ipoh was able to shake itself clear of the lethargy and varied enervating problems resulting from nearly four years of the disastrous and brutal Japanese occupation period, followed immediately by major postwar rehabilitation problems and labour unrest, compounded further by the early unsettled conditions arising from the Communist terrorists.

Once free of these difficulties, Ipoh gradually embarked on a development programme that picked up momentum and scope to rank it now as the fastest developing town, second only to Kuala Lumpur and its Petaling Jaya.

It is government and quasi-govern-

The 1941-45 period: looting followed war and then came inflation. In Ipoh, the bank

THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION period, a nearly four-year long nightmare, will live long in the memory of those who survived it.

Though the actual war began on December 8, 1941, it was not till a week later, on December 15, that the first wave of Japanese planes bombed Ipoh.

These raids were continued at intervals for about a week and most of the town evacuated to neighbouring rural areas, while looters took over.

It was on December 23 that the first Japanese troops marched into Ipoh and a form of military administration was set up in the premises of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank in Belfield Street.

The upheaval resulting from military

occupation of Ipoh created many difficulties, the majority of which remained unsolved throughout the occupation period. With the occupying country engaged in a major war, side effects on the people of Ipoh were a vast and unpleasant change to the happy, pleasant and peaceful life to which the people had become accustomed.

The population generally had to exercise the utmost ingenuity to barely exist and to keep clear of the many tentacles of the dreaded Japanese military police and its civilian counterpart.

Refugees returned to Ipoh in early 1942, many of them robbed of their cash and valuables, while some had the double blow of finding their homes

looted. Like most other towns, Ipoh was thrown open to legalised gambling in many forms. Blackmarketing flourished to keep pace with the uncontrolled galloping inflation largely caused by the incalculable amount of "banana" notes churned out by the Japanese.

These currency notes were so plentiful and practically so valueless, particularly in the closing stages of the occupation period, that the Japanese bank in Ipoh accepted pay-ins by the sackful, crediting accounts with an amount arrived at by working on a formula based on weight.

The administration of the town deteriorated and morale of public servants, including council employees,

ment initiative, coupled with the efforts of private enterprise, that is responsible for this widescale development.

Strangely enough, it was the Japanese military administration that laid the initial groundwork that has given Ipoh the impetus to grow.

A few short weeks after the close of the Malayan campaign in early 1942, the Japanese transferred the Perak state capital from Taiping to Ipoh, bringing to this town many departments and their staffs.

This change in status, however, did not have any particular significance during the occupation period and when the returning British civil administration retained Ipoh as the state capital, things looked promising.

It is quite unlikely that the residents envisaged in those early postwar months, that Ipoh would dramatically embark on a many-sided development programme that one day would make it the focus of attention of industrialists and businessmen.

They were far too busy then in trying to restart trades and businesses that had been shattered by the Japanese period, in which inflation knew no bounds.

Added to this was the wave of terrorism characterised by kidnapping, murder and robbery during the short transition period before the British military administration took over from the retreating Japanese.

With the establishment of the civil administration, which was engaged in the gigantic task of rehabilitation, labour unrest erupted, inspired by the Malayan Communist Party and its associates, resulting in hartals, shutdowns, strikes and instances of violence.

All this eventually led to the emergency being officially declared on a national scale following the cold-blooded murder of three European



weighed currency by the sackful because the notes were worth so little. Then, peace

gradually deteriorated to an all time low. It was to the credit of the people of Ipoh themselves rather than to the system of administration which the occupying power was able to enforce, that there were no major epidemics.

Then finally came the day of liberation and on a bright sunny morning in August 1945, a secret meeting was held in the top floor of the *Toyo-Ken*, a Japanese restaurant in Brewster Road, between officers of Force 136 and the Japanese, to arrange for the surrender of the Japanese in the Ipoh area. A few local residents were privileged to be connected with this in a rather indirect manner but to the town's population, the sudden appearance of a small con-

voy of cars, flying the Union Jack, was a memorable sight that brought tears of joy and thanksgiving to many.

There were the isolated instances of Japanese military and civilian personnel helping local residents in trouble. There were also the heartwarming instances of local residents, some working in departments, who risked their lives to render help and provided aid in one form or another to the underground forces.

Outstanding amongst all these is the saga of the late Mrs. Sybil Kathigasu, a frail woman of 43, whose dauntless courage and sheer heroism, have become legendary. Wife of a doctor and a nurse, she was awarded the George

Medal for her services to the guerillas and the gallantry she displayed in the face of heinous mental and physical torture by the Japanese.

She has been described as "Florence Nightingale of Malaya", "Odette of Malaya" and "Nurse Cavell of Malaya". The man mainly responsible for her death, Ekio Yoshemura, a sergeant in the *Kempeitai* was sentenced to death by a British Military Court. Mrs. Kathigasu died while receiving treatment in the United Kingdom, following her rescue from the Japanese prison in Ipoh by a British army unit. She has recorded her experiences under the Japanese in the book "No Dram of Mercy".

planters on a June morning in 1948 near Sungei Siput, about 25 miles from Ipoh.

Then followed a variety of strict regulations aimed at combating the militant Communism, involving food rationing, curfews and other restrictions.

Fortunately however, Ipoh did not experience all these, but on the contrary it is doubtful if any other town in the country was the scene of so many terrorist-inspired incidents.

There were more than 20 hand-grenade incidents alone in Ipoh during the early period of the emergency, many of them resulting in the death of innocent people.

With the authorities gaining the upperhand eventually, things began to improve and emergency-born projects, like the establishment of new villages (eight in the Ipoh area alone) coupled with the Korean War boom, started off Ipoh on its development programme.

One of the peculiarities of Ipoh is that its economic life responds most rapidly to the vagaries of the fluctuating tin and rubber markets and with these commodities in big demand, money was freely in circulation and businesses of all sorts benefitted greatly.

One of the biggest problems that had to be solved in the early liberation days was the lack of accommodation in the growing town, both for government and private offices, shops and housing.

Government was quickly in the field and either bought up several private buildings or rented them, for its many departments.

The police state headquarters moved into the town hall in 1948 "temporarily". They are still in occupation of it but are scheduled to vacate the building at the end of this year. An old two-storey wooden building, condemned as a risk for the scores of government workers that occupied it, was propped up by heavy beams to keep it from collapsing and its top floor removed. It is still in use.

Private enterprises competed for choice business premises and tea-money, officially banned, took the form of compensation for goodwill of the vacated tenancy and government imposed rent control to prevent victimisation and fleeing.

Housing syndicates sprang up in quick succession, and some of them, taking advantage of the situation, put up hundreds of cheap dwellings in areas which were then just outside the control of the town council.

These and the large number of illegal houses erected during the Japanese occupation period and subsequently, still pose a major problem for the authorities.

Eventually, the town council area was expanded from 13 square miles to



The heart of Ipoh. The Hongkong Bank building was a Japanese military office.

31 square miles in one big jump bringing within the town limits many new villages and regrouped areas.

Menglembu, a town on its own right for many decades and long famed for groundnuts, lost its identity when it became part of Ipoh and the three-mile stretch of road in between was converted into a light industrial area.

The tin restriction period which began in December of 1957, slowed down development. Hardly had these controls been removed by the end of 1960 and full scale mining renewed when death benefit groups, described as insurance companies, mushroomed in spectacular fashion, many of them established without adhering to legal requirements.

Ipoh is believed to have had the largest number of these insurance firms and in order to keep up premiums, policy-holders cut down on their expenditure, resulting in a remarkable effect on retail trade, until legislation was introduced to put these firms on a proper footing.

The growing town and population put a strain on the water supplies available and restrictions were necessary.

Connections for the new houses were given on a ratio while priority attempts were made to improve the situation.

The government embarked on one of its biggest water schemes and gave the Public Works Department the green-light to go ahead with a \$19 million project aimed at improving and extending piped water supply to the 350,000 people in most of Kinta District, surrounding Ipoh.

The major aspect of this scheme, the establishment of a filtration plant costing nearly \$5 million was completed early this year and work continues on other phases of the scheme.

Meanwhile, apart from the variety of building projects that had commenced,

Ipoh was giving birth to a new major industry that now ranks the state as the second biggest in this field, in the whole of Malaya.

In 1952, one or two iron-ore mines in the outskirts of Ipoh produced about 9,000 tons of ore, about one per cent of the Federation's total output.

The demand for the ore from Japan, sent off miners and others interested in it, in search of paying deposits and in 1959, there was a sudden upsurge of production, with 11 mines operating in the Ipoh area alone.

The production that year from these mines totalled 615,238 tons, second only to Trengganu, the biggest iron producer in Malaya and since then this rating has been maintained, with last year's production from the Ipoh mines totalling 1.9 million tons, or nearly 30 per cent of the nation's output.

There are 14 mines in operation in the Ipoh area this year and more are expected to start production in 1962.

Out of the 700 tin mines in operation in Malaya, just over 450 are located in Perak and as Ipoh is the centre of the state's economic life, it is not surprising that the present boom in this industry is also reflected in this town.

Other factors have focussed attention in Ipoh as a good prospect for industry and business: the establishment of the Tasek Industrial Estate, the presence of a large reservoir of skilled and unskilled labour, good transport and communication facilities, central location and growing potential market.

This year in Ipoh, building projects by Federal and State governments and the town council alone total over \$17 million, without taking into account construction work by private enterprises and the start of the \$17 million sewerage scheme.

Ipoh is now pushing ahead rapidly and 1962 will go down in its colourful history as an important period.