

# CLAUDE

## *The Man and the Times in Which He Grew Up in*

I have been asked to say something here tonight about Claude the Man. Rather than Claude the politician. However having spent nearly as long in politics as Claude I know that your personality is shaped by the times in which you grew up in and the profession in which you are involved in.

A life long profession such as politics involves dealing with a wide range of human strengths and weaknesses, like no other. You are perceived by some to be a saviour, a banker, a patriot, a devil and so on. It is therefore difficult to talk about Claude the Man without referring to how his personality was affected by the profession which was thrust upon him as his life's work, and by the history of Sint Maarten and the harsh economic realities when he entered politics in 1950.

As a young boy I saw Claude when he came to Saba to campaign for Charles Ernest Voges in the 1950 election. Claude was in his early twenties at the time.

In those days politics produced strange bedfellows, as I am sure it still does today.

In my collection of Memorabilia I have a copy of the permit issued by then Administrator Mr. Pieter Dijkstra for the political rallies held on Saba. Before reading it let me tell you the following. When Jackie Voges was Minister there was a time that he and Leo Chance were at war. I gave Jackie a copy of this document on the plane coming up from Curacao and asked him to go easy on Leo. Every time I looked back Jackie was laughing his head off.

The permit reads as follows:

“I the undersigned ONDERGEZAGHEBBER OF Saba hereby grants permission to Charles Earnest Wilfred Voges, to lecture in Hellsgate district on the 7<sup>th</sup> of November 1950, from 5 pm until 6.30 pm and in the Windwardside district from 8pm until 10 pm and in St. Johns District on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 1950 from 4.30 p.m. until 5.30 pm, and in The Bottom district from 8 pm until 9.30 p.m. with Julian Conner and LEO CHANCE singing songs during the lecture.

Signed Pieter Dijkstra, Saba 6 November 1950.

Leo Chance? Can you imagine Leo Chance as a singer? A rabble rouser yes, but a singer? I called him and he said that Julian Conner played the guitar and he did the singing. Next time you see Leo ask him to sing you a lullaby.

I saw Claude again in 1955. By that time he had started on his second term as Commissioner. I was on St.Maarten in transit to Curacao something which was to take two weeks. The sloop from Saba had missed the plane, and since the plane (A DC3) could only carry 30 passengers I had to wait my turn here.

I was staying at Miss Browlia Maillards just across the street from here.

Claude was sitting on the wharf in his bathing suit and someone said to me” That young man is Claude Wathey.” He was only 23 in 1950 when he entered politics as the # 5 candidate on the NVP list.

To understand what shaped Claude’s personality and determined his political career one must look at life on St. Maarten as it was in the 1950’s My experience here on backstreet the first days I was at Miss Browlia made an impression on me which I still carry with me today. In the back of the little building in which I stayed there were some large clay jars which caught water off the roof. This you dipped up and filled up a washbasin and if you wanted a bath you had to fill up a galvanize tub and try to fit yourself in it. The first thing in the morning ladies would be coming around from Middle Region and as far as Colombier with trays on their heads selling vegetables, bread, fresh milk and so on. Fresh bread every morning was available from Mrs. Louisa Hazel just a few houses up on the other side of the street. Somehow the St. Maarten bread tasted better than anywhere else. And don’t ask about the fried fish. No one anywhere could fry a fish better than people from Sint Maarten, especially from Simpsonbay. Everyone would take an early morning swim. I could not swim as on Saba it was not possible to swim among the rocks. I used to go down the alley by the Roman Catholic Church and Mr. Cy Wathey and others would be taking an early morning sea bath.

In the run of the day anyone who was anyone, would be in town. Very few people lived in what was then called “the country.” If I was lucky Frederic Froston who was a jack of all trades would carry me in his taxi to the “country” and to Marigot.

Compared to the nineteen forties the islands population was in a serious decline in the 1950’s. The population in 1940 was 2004, in 1943 it was 2085 and in 1946 it was 1609. The decline in population continued throughout the fifties.

In 1950 the population was 1478. In 1951, 1458, in 1953, 1571, in 1954, 1577, in 1958 the population was 1537. By comparison the French side in 1954 claims

to have had 3.360 inhabitants. However a report made up at the time claims that the figure were “parfaitement invraisemblable” because many people who leave the island never write out as they intend to return and then never do.

To compare with the other Dutch Windward Islands: In 1957 Sint Maarten had 1554 residents, Saba 1124 and Sint Eustatius 1055.

In 1961 finally a census was held. I had the responsibility to count from Prince Bernard Bridge to French Quarter, not including Middle Region. By 10 o'clock I was finished. A Mr. Milton was my driver. He knew everyone in the district and we could count from his car. I remember there were about 32 houses on that whole track and less than 200 residents.

However Sint Maarten's population figures have always been suspect, and not only those on the French side but here on the Dutch side as well. In 1969 when I opposed Claude for Senator I was living in a house in Cole Bay for awhile. After the elections I went through the voters list on the advice of Wallace Peterson.

I found 36 voters living in Grand Case registered in my house in Cole Bay. Talk about adding injury to insult? I am sure they had all voted for Claude. If I called off some of the names the audience here would laugh until next month, so I will let that go down as one of experience.

Most of these people had returned from Aruba with Dutch nationality and were registered here as voters, and of course they voted on the French side as well.

The census of 1961 indicated that there were supposedly 2728 people living on the Dutch side.

The population consisted of 1665 people of Dutch nationality and 1072 foreigners. Those of Dutch nationality were as follows: Born on Curacao 97, Aruba 138 (These were St. Maarteners who had returned back home mostly), Bonaire 6, St. Maarten 113, Saba 18 and Sint Eustatius 11, Other countries 89, Suriname 20, and Holland 66.

To give you a breakdown by village it was as follows:

Philipsburg 1158 of which 443 were foreigners

Simpsonbay 150 of which 22 “ “

Cole Bay 375 “ 166 “ “

Cul-de-Sac 316 “ 178 “ “

Upper P.Q. 258 “ 100 “ “

Lower P.Q. 285 “ 104 “ “ That is not what I counted. Half of French Quarter was registered in Dutch Quarter as their children went to school on the Dutch side. Someone

made the correction later on I guess to accommodate them.

Middle Region 186 of which 59 were foreigners.

The foreigners were divided as follows:

British/ French (Mostly Anguilla, followed by Nevis and St.Kitts): Total 1008

Canada and USA 23

Dominican Republic 25. Nearly all of them were Sint Maarteners born there who had not got their Dutch nationality as yet.

5 from other countries and 2 from Europe other than Holland. The Sint Maarten society was so small at the time that looking at the various places of birth one can go back and count e.g. the Surinamers, like the Lobo family, the Ferrier Family, Lindeboom and so on.

There was very little economic activity back then. Claude entered politics with a very small population and no economic activity to speak of. The declining population and its effects on daily life was commented on in the booklet on the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Methodism on Dutch Sint Maarten.

In the booklet the Reverend R. Colley Hutchinson the Methodist Minister in 1951 had the following to say:

“The island families of which the Van Romondt’s and the Brouwers were among the most prominent, have almost entirely left or died out, and the older generation which was contemporary with them is quickly passing away. Those who would have been the natural successors are most of them living away. In their place an unceasing stream of immigrants from the neighbouring islands supplies the craftsmen, manual labourers and domestic servants of today.

Life in Sint Maarten today offers a striking contrast to that of 100 years ago. The extensive fields of cane and cotton, the busy sugar mills, the ox-carts and carriages on the winding roads, the scenes by the salt-ponds, the prosperous estate houses with their bossy mammies and their swarms of servants and children, have become a legend. The independence and self-contained life of the island, pleasantly disturbed only at long intervals by the coming of a ship, is like a tale that is told.”

When Claude assumed power in 1951, this is what he met. A population of 1458. There were 20 cars in 1945 and 65 in 1951. Mind you half of these cars were never on the road as if they broke down you had to order parts via surface mail and it would take months.

The salt industry had come to a halt. Whereas in 1923 there were 55.843 barrels of salt exported weighing 6.421.945 kg. This had dropped to 6 to 700 barrels between 1940 and 1945 totaling not more than 80.000kg.

The exports for the year 1950 were as follows:

Potatoes f.307.—  
 Other Ground vegetables f.200.—  
 Lobsters f.25.549.—  
 Goats f.4.737.—  
 Hay f. 2.088  
 Skins f. 2.242  
 Cattle f. 32.365  
 Sheep f. 22.110.—  
 Pigs f. 1.865.—

Total f. 91.463.—That was for the entire year mind you. An export of less than one hundred thousand guilders. The imports were f. 318.050.

To compare to former years so that you can see there was little movement in the economy here are the export figures for the year 1924 when salt was in full production,.

Goatskins	332 kg	Na f.	274.—
Cotton	2.850 kg	“	3.729.—
Manure	540.000 kg	“	4.111.—
Salt	6.209.000 kg	“	37.305.—
Cattle, horses etc.		“	3.360.-
Total export:			f. 45.419.—

So in 27 years the export had grown by less than f.50.000 per year.

When I came to St.Maarten in 1955, the light plant which was next door closed down at ten o'clock. I had never seen electric lights on Saba so I remained outside looking at the street light waiting for the wind to blow it out, so when the light plant went off at ten and there was a heavy wind I was not a bit surprised. As a matter of fact I was told that the Philipsburg Electric Light Company had wanted to go till eleven o'clock. However Mr. Lionel Conner a shareholder had raised strenuous objections against that. He questioned what decent person would want a naked light bulb shining in their house after ten o'clock at night. Those were the realities of the day. Cattle raising was the main occupation when I lived here. Fishing was done by the Simpsonbay fishermen and I can still hear the sound of the conckshell as the fishermen came into the Great Bay in the morning to sell their fish. A strap of fish was twelve cents (f.0.30) and if you bought a strap of fifteen cents you got a lobsters for free. I remember going to Marigot with Frederick and he trying to sell the fifteen cents strap. People fed lobsters to their pigs back then and the ladies would tell Frederick “Go fire your backside, what I going to do with lobster.”

In 1951 there were the following livestock recorded here:

Horses 125, Donkeys 220, Horned Cattle 1875, sheep 1650 goats 850 pigs 650.

There were many more cattle also on the French side. People gave in less numbers for the fear of being taxed. I recall that there were as many as 7000 head of cattle island wide. My friend Lil Dan Beauperthuy on his various estates would have as many as 7 to 900 head of cattle at times.

The airport activity was as follows:

1950: Plane Landings	121	Passengers	866
1956 “ “	985	“	2.974
1957 “ “	1338	“	3.919

Because of the central location of Juliana airport in relation to a number of islands, many of these passengers were locals in transit.

Boat passengers:

1955 A total of 895 passengers of which 605 in transit ( mostly from Saba etc.)

1959 A total of 1.277 passengers of which 640 in transit. The first cruise ship was the Stella Polaris on January 14th, 1958 with 155 passengers.

In 1950 there were a total of 320 sailing vessels (mostly sloops, schooners, the Blue Peter and so on), 184 motor vessels and 12 yachts. Saba by comparison had 23 yachts for the year and it was a cause of jealousy on Sint Maarten at the time. See how many yachts Saba getting etc.

Enough figures already but they are important for the story of Claude and what motivated him.

The myth that Claudes family were millionaires when he started out in politics and that his father could buy him an election were just that. Claudes father Cyrus Wilberforce Wathey started out as a mechanic, later on he sold bicycles and so on. The all powerful Van Romondt family which was in decline in the 1930's, were being bought out by Mr. Louis Constant Fleming on the French side and by Cyrus Wathey on the Dutch side. Sydney Lejuez used to tell me that the slogan back when he was a boy, to keep the Watheys downstreet, which was considered less than upstreet which was dominated by the Van Romondt's back then.

So when Claude entered politics there was no economy on Sint Maarten to speak off. His father was well off by the standards of the day but would have only been considered a small grocer today. He had some good agencies and these paid off as the economy grew of course.

Elections were based more on personal contacts than on money spent on elections. All of that came later in the 1960's.

There was wheeling and dealing however. Claude told me more than once that when he wanted to change around the traffic in Philipsburg there was an

uproar. Piesco (Charles Wilson) was a crucial vote to get the bill through the house. He was acting funny and proving hard to get. On Claude's behalf Clem investigated and found out that a small calf would do the trick. One was bought from either Lexie or Miss Ela Brown and Piesco was back on board. And so for the price of an ordinary calf traffic in Philipsburg was turned around. Not even a Golden Calf would do the trick nowadays.

Did Claude's colour play a role in assuring success in his first election. No doubt it played a part. St.Maarten was still dominated by a few white families.

However unlike Saba at the time where I grew up, I did not experience racism in the old St.Maarten families white or black. I was treated by everyone from Great Bay to Marigot and back as if I was part of the family. In the early elections the next biggest vote getter after Claude was Mr. William Benjamin Peterson who was also a white man.

In 1950 there were 558 voters of which 424 voted. Claude got 4 votes but he was campaigning for Ernest Voges at the time.

In 1951 there were 599 voters of which 513 voted and Claude got 239 votes.

In 1959 there were 681 voters and 624 voted. On Saba there were 513 voters and on St.Eustatius there were 422. It is for that reason that each Island had 5 seats on the Island Council. The three islands formed one Island Territory. I was elected in 1971 and served from 1975 to 1983 as a Member of the Executive and Island Council of the Windward Islands.

My first speech to the Island Council was that "I am not here to praise Ceasar, I am here to bury him." I was referring to the system of government, but everyone

Was cursing me out saying I meant Claude.

By the time I started to work in the Postoffice in 1960, Claude was already in his third term in office. Very little had changed. However with the Cuban revolution and with the assistance of a dynamic Governor Japa Beaujon there was a change in the weather,

Do not underestimate the power of the Lt. Governor. In the sense that the writer Naipaul once said that" the problem in the West Indies is that there are too many people in positions of authority with the power to hold up progress and who lack the initiative to make things move."

I have worked with many Lt. Governors and few of them are serious about their jobs. Always traveling to nonsensical meetings . Highly paid by the Island Territories but with no interest in their jobs other than the privileges which go with it. I have experienced Lt. Governors being away from their islands 285 days out of the year and the Act. Lt. Governors having to do the

jobs. The politicians who are elected are frustrated to death by Lt. Governors not functioning.

And so Claude was fortunate that he had a hard working man like Beaujon to help him get St.Maarten on the move. That they had a falling out later on, a political falling out, is a fact, but in the beginning Claude and Sint Maarten benefited by having a hard working Lt. Governor.

The Claude I knew back in 1960 was a dynamic person. He was good looking , lived among the people and got things done and took care of his loyal followers.

He was rather a quiet man and came over as shy and was not a dynamic speaker. In a discussion he would outwait you and would not easily commit himself. You never knew where he stood until he saw the need to strike out at you.

He lived opposite the Post office. The doors were open then, no air conditioning of course, so working there we practically eat out of the same kitchen so to speak.

I can see him now jumping over his verandah railing and heading up the street to his office. I remember once seeing a film of him doing just that. The film was well done and showed Claude as a man of the people. Even I who was running against him had to admit that we were in trouble with that film.

Claude was known to hold his liquor as well. I remember once we are the Pasangrahan bar and being young and inexperienced we challenged Claude to see who could drink the most. We started to drink from the top shelf bottle by bottle. All kinds of mixed up drinks. All I can remember from that drinking spree is that two days later I was awakened by Capt. Hodge telling me "Man you bring shame on me." I asked him what happened and he told me that they had brought me up the beach on a door of the Pasangrahan and had dumped me off in my bed. That hangover lasted for a month. Claude had survived of course and was seen the next morning jumping off his verandah and heading up the street as always.

I remember when he was having a problem with his heart. He was going to Puerto Rico. Everyone was concerned. When we looked there is Claude coming out of his house, jumping over the verandah and getting in his fathers car to go to the airport.

Claude had a difficult task in balancing family life with a public career. Although 7 children were considered a small family at the time. I had friends with 48, 65 and so on. One friend had 29 children by 29 different women. I do not need to mention names here. Just the numbers will indicate to old timers who I am talking about, so relatively speaking Claude was mostly a home boy with a small family. If you have been reading the papers the last

years you will realize that the same story does not hold true for his brother Chester.

Shortly after starting to work at the Postoffice I became close with Claude and Clem. I was making f.192.50 a month back then. After paying room and board I had f.27.50 left over.

Back then I measured the cost of living by the price of a glass of rum and a pack of camel cigarettes. A pack of cigarettes at Carty's store was f.0.25 cents and the price of a glass of rum or whiskey was five cents.

At the Lido we could snuggle up close to Claude and Clem's table and you done know. The taxpayers were charged for we glass of rum back then.

By 1962 I was so close to Claude and Clem that they never made a turn unless I was around them. Claude sent me in 1962 to Saba to head his campaign over there. He was in trouble. He had Voges, Lopes and Henry Every running against him. Claude had decided to run for Senator.

I was campaigning for Thomas Van Hugh Hassell. He was the first man of colour from Saba to have made it high in the civil service. His father Capt. Thomas Charles Vanterpool was a relative of my mother and Van Hugh was my brother Freddie's godfather.

The party of Hugh Lopes got 747 votes and the DP 893. Claude won by 146 votes. I had managed to get 171 votes for Van Hugh of which 152 votes on Saba. It was not an easy job mind you. No one knew him as he had lived most of his life on St.Maarten, Curacao and Aruba.

There was always the mystique of political power. Claude I must say was not easy in dealing with political opponents if he had to. As the Dutch say: "Ik heb het aan de lijve gevoeld."

I remember once on the Alm plane coming from Curacao. My friend Rupert Maynard told me this story. He was employed by public works at the time digging a trench somewhere. Rupert said something negative about Claude. Maurice Maccow jumped up and challenged him to repeat it in front of Claude. Maurice jumped in the truck and in a jiffy was back with Claude. With Maurice challenging him to repeat what he had said, Rupert admitted to me that he was scared as hell and would not repeat anything. Jobs were very hard to come by back then.

In 1955 Claude got 255 votes. The second biggest vote getter by far was Willie Bee Peterson with 101 votes.

Claude's personality was also shaped by the century in which he grew up in. St. Martin's prominent people like Josiah Charles Waymouth had been fighting the colonial government all along. Waymouth publish St.Maarten's first newspaper St.Martin Day by Day from 1911 to 1922 and later on "New Life". He also published a wonderful book "Memories of St.Martin N.P."

I have a copy of his newspaper and his book.

Willem Frederick Adolphus Labega was an educator by profession and collaborated with Waymouth. The newspaper “De Bovenwindse Stemmen” praised him in 1937 edition for his writings.

The next great St.Martiner was Anthony Reynier Gravenhorst Brouwer. Although he was born on Saba of Dutch parents his father AJC Brouwer had been Governor of all three islands for thirty years.

No one felt more St.Martiner than “Broertje” Brouwer. He was married to a Van Romondt and he had his own newspaper “De Slag om Slag>’ I have copies of nearly all his newspapers at home.

Claude as a young boy would have known Brouwer. He had his home and printery where Vina Del Mar was later located just across the street from the Oranje Café. Brouwer fought hard for better communications for St.Martin. When he questioned the Governor-General on the voters list he was jailed for a month.

In 1939 he published an article which was considered insulting to a friendly Head of State. The word came to him that the Governor had ordered his arrest for six weeks. The friendly Head of State was Adolph Hitler. Brouwer was terrified of being confined to small spaces. He was a big man. He went across the street to the Oranje Café, had a few drinks, came back home put a gun to his head and committed suicide rather than go to jail again. A short while after that Hitler invaded Poland and later Holland as well’

Allan Richardson used to carry around the “Slag Om Slag” for Brouwer and used to tell me stories about him. Allan by the way was a love child of Brouwers by an Anguillan mother.

While St.Martin’s population was being depleted, the islands of Curacao and Aruba were booming. In later years Claude would always complain about people who had left St.Maarten and who years later had returned to put up a big mouth. His cry was “Where were they when St.Maarten needed them.”

Claude liked to be seen as an expert on how to bring a lighter ashore and loved to give directions. Remember there was very little to do back then. One way to show leadership was when the monthly steamer came in. Claude would be on the wharf directing operations all day.

As the sixties approached so did change come. Between 1962 and 1966 Claude had to travel often by small plane to Curacao as he was part of a coalition with only 12 members supporting the government. In later years in traveling with him, even though we were from opposite parties, I learned to appreciate his sense of dedication. He loved his children and had to spend many lonely days away from them.

One cannot talk about Claude without in the same breath mentioning Clem Labega. They formed a political tag team like no other in these islands. Wallace Peterson used to call Clem “The Evil Genius”. From 1960 up to 1968 I was constantly in their company. I could tell that I was in trouble when I would walk into a bar and Clem gave me the cold shoulder. Clem was the one who would throw verbal blows in you to soften you up after which Claude would move in for the kill.

To be honest with you I was not easy myself, and it did not endear me to them when I started writing for the Windward Islands Opinion. I also reported the news from 1965 – 1968 on PJD-2. These were activities highly suspect to Claude and Clem.

In 1967 Claude engineered it that there were no elections on all three Windward Islands. I went along with Claude to both islands to work out the deal. I was the one who he sent to ask Jose Lake to join him at his table at the bullfight at St. John’s Ranch. A deal was struck and the next week an advertisement appeared in the Opinion for the Shell Company, whose agent at the time was Claude.

After the 1967 non election I happened to mention to Mr. Lake that if there was ever a threat again of a non-election that I would oppose Claude myself. After May 30<sup>th</sup> 1969 Mr. Lake called me and asked me if I was of the same mind. I threw caution to the wind and said yes. The next day the headline in the paper was “Will Johnson to oppose Claude Wathey” and the heat was on.

This talk is about Claude Wathey though and I want to say that even though I was his opposition for the rest of his life we did have a cordial relationship, however rocky it may have seemed at times.

I would like to leave room to answer questions from the floor, but I would like to offer some final points of reflection on Claude :

1. He was a product of his time, shaped by the small scale society he lived in, a declining population and a weak economy.
2. Claude was aware of the struggle for recognition of St. Maarten by people like Waymouth, Labega, Brouwer and others.
3. In 1951 when he became Commissioner he saw that St. Maarten would continue to be neglected and that something had to be done. He told me that he had once went by boat to Cuba and was very impressed with tourism there in the late nineteen forties.
4. Claude was also influenced by the fact that prominent representatives like William Plantz, Charles Ernest Voges and Hugh Lopes who were living on Curacao were neglecting the interests of the Windward Islands by doing so.

In 1962 Claude decided against all odds that he would remain residing on St.Maarten. He opened thereby the possibility for all future representatives to live on their islands.

5. Claude was a keen observer of human wants and needs and played into that in a personal way and thus remained in touch with the voters and ahead of the political field.

6. Claude had the ability to attract and keep a close knit loyal following among a key number of people in the Civil Service who could advance his agenda and assure success in future elections.

7. Claude governed best with few people to deal with. The decision making process became too cumbersome for him with the extension of the number of people holding political office. Capital which has its own life when coming in to St.Maarten became a factor which could no longer be controlled.

8. Claude was generous to those loyal to him , even though it can be claimed that the Island Budget was stretched and squeezed to the limit in order to accommodate those loyalists. He saw the budget as something to be shared up among the St.Maarten people, and if infrastructure had to be neglected in the process, well so be it.

9. Claude was a regionalist and even though his call for independence did not seem sincere because of the circumstances under which it was made at the time, I am convinced that he saw the possibility of an independent St.Maarten.

10. Claude could not have anticipated the growth of the St.Maarten economy and would not have wanted St.Maarten to develop to the extent that it did. Testimony to that is the fact that all his ancestral homes and properties acquired are the same as his father bought them. If the Van Romondt's came back alive the only buildings they would recognize on St.Maarten would be the buildings owned by the Watheys.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me end by stating that even if I wanted to forget Claude I could not. He was born on my mothers birthday and he died on my fathers birthday.

I want to thank those who have come here tonight and if there are any questions about Claude and the period of which I have been speaking I will be happy to answer them.

Thank You

Will Johnson  
July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2007  
Community Center

