

My friends in the Hazel family

I had promised myself for quite some time now that I would visit my friend former Commissioner and Act. Lt. Governor Sam Hazel. On Friday November 6th I finally had enough free time to try and find his house. Sam had been having serious health issues and I wanted to visit with him. Drs. Eugene Holiday who is married to one of Sam's many daughters gave me instructions as to how to get to the house. I remember years ago at the old airport Sam was going to New York with the wife and children. He was over in the bar area with Allan Richardson, Clem Labega, Claude Wathey, myself and a host of others. When the call came we all had a good laugh. There was tough Sam going on vacation with his wife and a host of pretty little daughters all dressed the same. We were all teasing Sam and it was a real treat to see tough image Sam heading out to the plane surrounded by all those cute little children all excited about going to New York. In that moment you got a complete different picture of how a man is brought low or raised to special heights when surrounded by the female of the species.

Anyway I thought I was following Drs. Holiday's directions and took the road after Mr. Piasco's former grocery. As I drove up the road I thought to myself, this is not the road I would expect my friend Sam to retire on. Driving all the way to the top I found a place to turn around. The few people I met on the road knew they were on St.Maarten and that was all.

The next street I decided to enter looked more like where I expected Sam to live. Symbolic to St.Maarten, local wealth and foreign poverty lie within a stone's throw of each other. On Sam's street there were nice homes and gardens all the way to the top. Not one name on any of the gates though. No one even to ask directions from. Finally I saw an old man. From the moment I asked him if he knew where Sam lived, I realized he was an old Haitian national. No luck there, so I decided I would have to leave the visit for another day, as I did not even have a phone number which I could call.

The following morning I had a breakfast appointment at the Chesterfield restaurant. The first person to come and greet me was my friend Sam. I told him my story and he informed me that he lived in the house of his late uncle Edward. Sam was looking great but he confirmed to me that he had been in a bad way.

I remember once in New York my cousins who lived around the Aquaduct racetrack took me there to see the races. Among the eighty thousand or so people attending the races I saw a distinguished looking man who reminded me of someone. I decided to take a bold step, walked up to him and asked if by any chance he was related to Mr. Melford Hazel on St.Maarten. He looked stunned for a moment. I told him who I was and that I lived on St.Maarten. Turns out it was Edward brother of Melford. This was in the nineteen sixties. In later years I met him often and each time he would comment on how observant I was to pick him out of such a large crowd at the race track.

I had met Sam in the 1950's when I was staying at the home of Miss Browlia Millard on Backstreet. Sam lived on the other side of the street just a bit up the road. Teacher Frank Hassell was teasing him about the fact that he was on one political party running for office while his mother was on the list of another political party.

In 1969 I ran for Senator against the all powerful Claude Wathey and the Democrat Party. To everyone's surprise I did much better with my URA party (which Mr. Vincent Astor Lopes of St.Eustatius promptly named the United Russian Alliance), than generally expected. After the elections I was persona non grata to many people. No one wanted to be associated with me. No room at the inn so to speak. And no one wanted to be caught renting me an apartment. One day I was at the old airport bar and to be honest I was depressed. I needed somewhere to park up my suitcase. The rest usually took care of itself. Sam who was then Commissioner for the DP came up to me and in a joking manner asked if I had my suitcase packed. The last place where I was living was in a small house close to the R.C. Church in Simpsonbay. The old couple who rented to me panicked when they learned that I was the Will Johnson who was against Mr. Claude. A well-known official close to the family intervened on my behalf and I was allowed to stay there till the end of the month. I could have gotten refuge on the French side. However I thought that I would be removed from the census and lose my government job in the process. Word seemed to have gotten around. I thought Sam was making fun of me and I used my best cuss words at him. I should have known better. He said "My father sent to get you." So we went by my place picked up my suitcase and went to see his father the legendary Melford Hazel Sr. He informed me that he was putting me up at the Sea View Hotel and he wanted to see who would remove me out of the Sea View Hotel. He knew my financial circumstances. I was making something like fls.212.—a month at the time. Even though he objected to my paying anything for the room, I tried to keep up with the bar bill every month. Sometimes Allan Richardson or Clem Labega would intervene in that department and I would be told that my substantial bar bill had been paid. My room was above the Taj Mahal store. I would love to tell friends that I lived in the Taj Mahal building. My room became the headquarters for visiting Sabans, and was the Editorial headquarters for the Labour Spokesman. Sometimes when Alrett Peters would be there together with me going over what to put in the paper, Sam would come up and have a friendly chat. Mind you the paper and the Union it represented were both on Sam and the D.P.'s case every issue. But such was the relationship. In looking back I can proudly say that among those who voted for me in 1969 were people like Alec The Butcher (Richardson) and a substantial amount probably of his forty eight children, also Melford Hazel, Aubrey Cannegieter, Elias Richardson and many of the old guard national heroes now fondly remembered, Alrett Peters too of course and his father as well.

I lived in the Sea View Hotel for over two years and no one could come there and take me out. So man when I heard that Sam was not well, I felt guilty that I had not been to see him.

Melford Augustus Hazel was born in Cul-de-Sac on July 3rd 1898. As a young man he worked in the Dominican Republic. He later moved to the United States. After working there for a number of years he returned to St.Maarten in 1927 where he started a grocery store on the Backstreet. He always told me that he was ahead of the local merchants at the time as he brought a car along with him and made home deliveries. His wife Miss Weez (Elouise York) also had a bakery. Mr. Frank Hassell reminded me of how delicious that hot bread was in the morning hours when Miss Browlia would walk across the street to get them for breakfast. My St.Maarten stepfather or better put Saba's stepfather Mr. Frederic Froston (Taxi # 16) would be there by bakery sometimes till 2am playing cards while Miss Weez was getting the bread ready to bake. Such was life on the quiet Back street back then.

Mr. Melford also started the first ice factory and lemonade factory. The late Mr. Leonard Conner used to say of Mr. Hazel's lemonade that it was "a necessary evil; once you get accustomed to it you cannot do without it."

In 1951, when the islands achieved autonomy, Mr. Hazel entered politics. He served on the Island Council until 1955. He was always outspoken against the free-for-all-development which took place on St. Maarten in the last years of his life.

I received a call one day years later informing me that he was not doing well. I took the plane and went to the home on Backstreet where he lived. As a young boy growing up in Cul-de-Sac he had a dream of one day becoming a businessman in Philipsburg. He realized his dream and eventually became one of the most successful businessmen that St. Maarten has produced.

I expected him to be in bed. Instead his daughter Mrs. Helen Lake (wife of Joseph H. Lake Sr.) directed me to the garden below. There he was, looking pretty good, relaxing on a day bed with one of his grandchildren sitting talking to him. The yard was full of sweet potatoes, sugar cane, pumpkin vines and the things which grew well in the sandy soil of Philipsburg. I thought I would make his day by opening the conversation with "And Claude tells people that you can't do any farming on St. Maarten." We never discussed the state of his health. We talked politics. Somehow I thought he would have been around forever. It was not too many years before that I had seen him under the gennip (kennip) tree on the Sea View Hotel Patio holding a small baby. When I asked him he smiled and said "This is the one for the girl from Anguilla." I thought how nice of him to be holding the maids baby. That is until the bartender explained me differently. I would not say that he had caught up with my friend Alec the Butcher, but it must have been some fun trying to be number one in a race like that.

One of the sad things I remember from those days as the guest of the Hazel's is my friend Marie who was the head waitress in the restaurant. She was always very kind to me. When I stayed there in later years as a regular paying guest Marie was always happy to see me and noted my progress in life. On a normal day years later Marie left her house in Cole Bay and vanished from the face of the earth. I always ask myself how that was possible and what really happened to her. Among the other Hazel's which I knew and was friends with, was Mrs. Eulalie Meyers born Hazel, Mr. Cyril Hazel and Mr. Melford Hazel Jr. and all the other Hazel's who befriended me in my hour of need. When I see Cyril I always ask him "Any word about our friend Marie yet?"

At the same Sea View Hotel years later I was sitting at the bar with my brother Guy (Brother Sam of Lions Fame). Two young girls walked in and sat at a table. I informed Guy that he was on his own and I walked over to the table where destiny took me in its wake and thirty six years later one of those girls is still making all the difference in my life.

Sam I will try and pass soon and tell you about Miss Jean's rooster which used to walk boldly across the street and peck out the bags of corn which Miss Weez had in the store. What a commotion! We will reminisce on the formula your mother used that made such tasty bread which I still remember more than fifty years later. And by the way! If I did not say thank you before, this is my way of thanking you, your father and the rest of the Hazel family.

Will Johnson