

Captain Hubert Arsene Hodge.

By; Will Johnson

On my way to school in the nineteen fifties I would lodge at the home of Miss Browlia Maillard on the Backstreet. In 1959 I started lodging with Captain Hodge and Miss Bertha and the family on the Front street up to the head of town. Close to the Passangrahan Hotel. Across the street in the Buncamper residence later came Mr. Stetson Risdon, also in a two storied building across the street lived Wren "Aa-Aa" Philips and her daughter Claudia, also next to the Hodge Guesthouse lived Phyllis and Brother Joe Matthew, further up the family of Evans Deher and his wife Irene Larmonie, then you had James Marlin, his mother Nestor, Sylvain Gumbs ("Horse"), Gaullie and his wife Gloria Brooks, "Miss Babe and Malvina, and so on.

When Captain Hodge died and also Miss Bertha, the family asked me to do the eulogies at both of their funerals. The story of the old captain is drawn from personal memories as well as excerpts from the eulogy at the time.

Captain Hodge was born in the village of Grand Case on November 3rd, 1900. I never forget that date as for years I used to file his income tax papers and fill out other legal documents for him. So when that date comes around I think to myself "Captain Hodge would have been 109 today." His wife Mrs. Bertha Hodge was born Lawrence and also from Grand Case. Her father was one of the white Lake's from Anguilla and had children by two Lawrence sisters from Grand Case. Married to one, while having children by the other sister. Something not unusual for St.Maarten, at the time. I used to like to drive over to Grand Case on Saturdays with the Captain and his wife. They used to do their grocery shopping at the grocery store of her brother Jimmy Lawrence. Her other brothers were Nel Lawrence and Jody, also Frank Lake and others who lived in Connecticut. The Grand Case people catered to New London and other cities in Connecticut. The Saba people congregated in Richmond Hills in Queens, New York.

When I drive around St.Maarten I remind my wife how when we would get to Wallowa Hill, Miss Bertha would hold on for dear life and caution the captain "Lawd Austin take it easy no. Remember this is Wallowa Hill you know." Mysteries and dangers unknown to me were lodged in the treacherous descent of the Wallowa Hill road. That same black and yellow Chevrolet car would be pushed around the corner of up street by Tony and I after the Captain was sound asleep, until we could safely turn it on and head to the bullfight at the St.John's Ranch. Captain Hodge did not find it out then and I don't think he will mind me telling it now.

The life of a seaman has been celebrated in poetry and song ever since the beginning of time. It has been romanticized from biblical times in the psalms, through the Odyssey by Homer to more recent times by Nobel Prize laureate Derrick Walcott who also has roots on St.Maarten. Johannes van Romondt was his great- great- grandfather.

In order to pay tribute to Captain Hodge let us recall his life through the words of some of the great writers and poets who have served mankind. The poet Walter Colton wrote:

I love the sailor; his eventful life –
His generous spirit – his contempt of danger;
His firmness in the gale, the wreck – the strife;
And though a wild and reckless ocean ranger,
God grant he make the port, when life is o'er,
Where storms are hushed and billows break no more.

In his younger days Captain Hodge got his first taste of the sea with his brother Taddy who was also a Captain. As a matter of fact Taddy was a lifelong Captain and better known on the French side and the region. However Captain Arsene (called Austin) got much more publicity from the press and travel writers because of the fact that he was captain of the romantic old schooner the “Blue Peter”. He also worked in Santo Domingo, the United States, and for a while also in Aruba.



There he met his future wife Miss Bertha who was then married to a Velasquez from Venezuela. He used to tell us stories about his days in the Dominican Republic. We even had a dog “Ramon Natero” named after a famous rebel leader who Captain Hodge had met at a dance in San Pedro de Macoris.

When Captain Hodge returned to St.Maarten for a while he was captain of the “Trixie”. He also built the sloop the “Grace a Dieu” on the beach at the foot of town. But it was the schooner the “Blue Peter” which is synonymous with Captain Hodge, and Windward Islanders of the older generation cannot think of one unless they think of the other.

In order that you may understand the difficulty Captain Hodge had in carrying out his job, bear with me while I delve into the recent history of sea transportation between the islands.

The transportation by boat between the Windward Islands which had been excellent before World War 1 deteriorated rapidly after the exodus of our people to work in the oil refineries on Aruba and Curacao.

Unbelievable as it is today a voyage from Saba to St.Eustatius could take between 4 and 22 hours to complete. Even in 1942 we have accounts of vessels arriving on St.Maarten several days after it had left Saba or St.Eustatius.

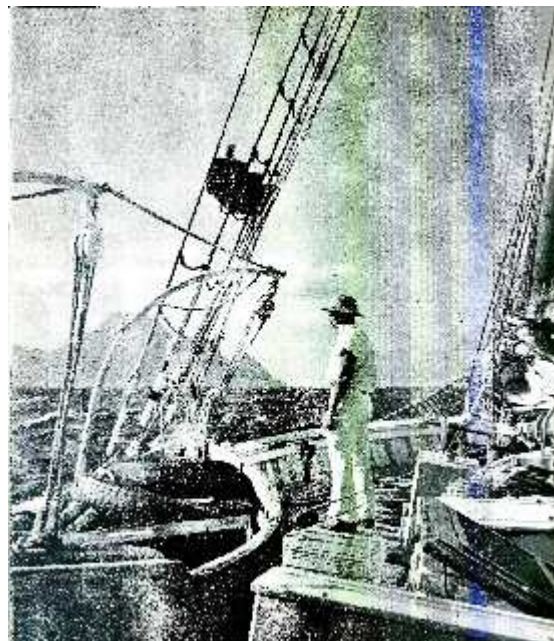
During the years of the Second World War, Mr. Remi de Haenen was given a subsidy to operate two open motor boats between the Windward Islands. These were the so-called "Blue Boats" the "Guidon" and the "Blenac." When in February 1944, Princess Juliana visited our islands it was the Blue Boats which transported her entourage between the islands. Later in 1944 the government bought a 16 ton motor vessel, named the "Trixie" and Captain Hodge was put in command.



The "Trixie" was known for its rough rides as it was a river boat and not intended for our rough seas. Besides that, not being sea-worthy, the Trixie was considered dangerous and already in October 1945 it was taken out of service.

In 1947, to be exact on September 2nd, 1947, the "Blue Peter" started its first service. The schooner had been purchased on Curacao by the Governor from an American couple who had brought the schooner down from the United States. The "Blue Peter" was a romantic old schooner with an engine much too small for such a heavy boat. It gave regular service between the Dutch Windward Islands and St.Kitts until the end of August 1961.

As dependent as the "Blue Peter" was on wind and water it was impossible to keep any schedule. Nevertheless under strenuous conditions and even during hurricanes Captain Hodge and his crew kept the "Blue Peter" going. He even received a special citation for his courage during a hurricane from the Governor of St.Kitts. He had weathered a storm there in the roadstead of Basseterre. Captain Hodge weathered many storms at sea. We are reminded of Ulysses wandering the Mediterranean when we think back on Captain Hodge weathering a hurricane in the roadstead of Basseterre. One of Ulysses' men called out to him and said; "Master there is a storm approaching." Ulysses answered him and said; "My son, in war and on the high seas, I have weathered many storms. What does one more storm matter? Let her come!"



The Blue Peter, St. Kitts, 1947. Photo by the author.

Although the Blue Peter was to know other captains in her lifetime, the association between Captain Hodge and the “Blue Peter” is one like a married couple who have been married for life.

Derrick Walcott in his poem “Sea Chantey” describes schooner life in detail and from which we quote the following:

The histories of schooners
Are murmured in coral,
Their cargoes of sponges
On sandpits of islets
Barques white as white salt
Of acrid St.Maarten
Hulls crusted with barnacles
Hold foul with great turtles
Whose ship boys have seen
The blue heave of Leviathan,
A sea-faring, Christian,
And intrepid people.

Many are the stories told and written about this period in Windward Islands history. I quote from one which I translated from the Dutch and written in a book entitled “Naar de West”, by Piet Bakker.

“The fair sailing vessel “Blue Peter” brought us to Saba. It is a schooner with splendid brown sails, and when it moves across the sapphire blue of the Caribbean Sea, this creates a beautiful combination of colours such as hardly can be imagined that it is real.

It is often that one has this feeling in the West. When time stands still someplace one encounters images which one only knew from romantic engravings and thus one cannot easily accept that everything is real and tangible. That Captain of the “Blue Peter” for example! A man, with lovely mahogany brown skin, and eyes cast in blue steel. He had that difficult something to define in his gaze which gives away the seaman.

During the voyage I often tried to imagine how he would look with a red headscarf, a black patch over the eye, golden earrings, and a frightful knife in his belt and the black pirate flag in the mast of the "Blue Peter." The sea on which he sails with his schooner has for centuries been a notorious hunting ground for pirates. Up until today a barbaric romantic aura hangs over the sea and the islands. Also the crew of the "Blue Peter" made the impression on me as if they had stepped out of one of my boyhood books into living reality." End of quote.



I joined the Hodge Household in the late nineteen fifties and remained with them for a number of years. By that time Capt. Hodge was engaged in a new enterprise and had embarked on a new venture, namely that of running a guesthouse. Also staying there from Saba and going to school on St.Maarten were, Raffie and Boyston Sorton, Douglas and Garvice Johnson and Carl Mervin Hassell.

Whereas Captain Hodge while at sea was a tower of strength, there were times on land that he wavered and perhaps would have even backed off. However to his back was a solid wall of steel in the person of his beloved wife "Miss Bertha." In her vocabulary the word surrender did not exist.

I have fond and lasting memories of the years I lived with the Hodge family. Memories, of an era which has now forever passed from the St.Maarten scene. The space we shared with perhaps three thousand people is now a struggle for existence between over one hundred thousand residents and millions of tourists. The guesthouse owned by the Hodges no longer exists, but for many years it was the only place for the leading families of St.Martin to congregate for Halloween parties, weddings, birthdays and other special events.

Captain Hodge, though, never quite surrendered his love of the sea and like the poet Swinburne wrote: "I want to move with the moving ships, change as the winds change, veer in the tide," so too, often times Captain Hodge must have thought when he sat in the late afternoons on his patio looking out to sea beyond the bar. He went into retirement in the nineteen sixties. Well retirement if you discount the houses he and Miss Bertha built and supervised themselves.

Captain Hodge was knighted by Her Majesty the Queen. He was honoured by the Island Government of St.Maarten which named the small pier after him, and he was honoured by the Saba Lions Club for his many years of service to Saba before it had an airport. The 107th psalm gives the best possible description of the life of the men of the sea and we end this tribute to Captain Hodge by quoting from that mighty psalm.

'Some went down to the sea in ships,

Doing business on the great waters;

They saw the deeds of the Lord,
His wondrous works in the deep.
For he commanded, and raised the stormy wind,
Which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They mounted up to heaven,
They went down to the depths;
Their courage melted away in their evil plight;
They reeled and staggered like drunken men,
And were at their wits end.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
And he delivered them in their distress;
He made the storm be still,
And the waves of the sea were hushed.
Then they were glad because they had quiet,
And he brought them to their desired haven.

When you visit the Captain Hodge wharf, after having read this, now you know something about the man it was named after.

Will Johnson