

Lionel Bernard Scott

By Will Johnson

Lionel Bernard Scott was born on St.Martin on January 28th, 1897.

He was from a large family. He was one of six brothers and ten sisters. From an early age he was very ambitious and went to the Dominican Republic in search of work as so many people from St.Martin did at the time. While there he went to vocational school.

On the anniversary of the 100th year of his birth I was privileged to give a speech in the Methodist Church about his life. For this article I will quote from that as well as personal memories of this famous man.

After I had made the speech my brother Freddie told me the following story. Our father Daniel was a foreman for Mr. Scott when he did construction on Saba in the nineteen thirties. When Freddie went to school in St.Martin in 1947, our mother wrote a letter to Mr. Scott to keep an eye on him. The well known Mrs. Zilah Richardson who had a guesthouse on the backstreet was Mr. Scott's aunt. On Sunday evenings Mr. Scott would pick her up and take her to church. Freddie was standing on Front street next to the Methodist church at the Davis home where he lived. He was smoking a cigarette. When Freddie saw Mr. Scott passing he quickly threw the cigarette over the wall. At the same time Mr. Scott slammed the brake and reversed the car and called out;" That wouldn't be Johnson's boy smoking a cigarette, would it?" Freddie said that he was so frightened that he was very careful after that with cigarette smoking thinking that Mr. Scott would have spies checking on him.

Of all the people I knew as a young boy on St.Martin, Mr. Scott was one of those who left the greatest impression on me. As I recall the first time I met him, the poet Longfellow's words come to mind: "Noble by birth, yet nobler by great deeds." I was not the only one impressed with Mr. Scott .Former Minister Leo Chance told me once that "Scott was such an imposing figure, I was scared of him." I never thought I would hear him say that he was afraid of anybody. At the time Mr. Chance was Minister and he was such a tough one that other politicians used to use his name as a BOO BOO man to scare their children into good behavior.

Yes somehow when one met Mr. Scott one immediately got the impression of being in the presence of a man of noble birth. His strength was in quietness and in confidence.

The Scott family was very poor with few opportunities available to them to improve their financial status. However by the time he passed away on January 3rd 1966 Mr. Scott was considered the first black aristocrat on St.Martin. He was owner of an estate of the former masters and had been so successful in business that he could live in more comfort and with

fewer financial worries than the estate owners of old. His financial success also gave him time to dedicate himself to public life.

In the Dominican Republic Mr. Scott was also active in the Marcus Garvey Movement (Universal Negro Improvement Association). After acquiring a certain amount of knowledge, and still in his early thirties, he returned to his beloved St. Martin and its people with a burning desire to serve them both. Mr. Scott co-founded the Philipsburg Mutual Improvement Association in 1932. This was the first benevolent Association ever established on St. Martin and Mr. Scott was its president for many years. He remained a faithful member until his death.

“De Slag om Slag” newspaper in its edition of August 7th, 1937 reports on a meeting to commemorate the Association's 5th anniversary as follows: “The President Mr. L. Bernard Scott's address exhorted his people to stick to, and practice the principles of the Association: Unity, Love and Friendship. He endeavoured to convince them that without unity nothing can be achieved. That, whatever has ever been achieved by the individual or by nations and peoples, it was as a result of the aforementioned virtues. “The society,” he said, “can only live and flourish through the efforts of real men and women who with their backs to the wall are willing to fight adversity with bull-dog grip determination.”

Besides looking after the welfare of their members the PMIA and other organizations, in former times, also held parades to draw attention to their activities. “De Slag om Slag” (Blow for Blow) of September 17th, 1938, reports on such a parade.

“On Tuesday the 6th instant, at about 4 o'clock p.m. the Philipsburg Mutual Improvement Association staged a parade which went around the town. First came the National flag, which was followed by the band. Then, followed a banner of Orange cloth with ‘LONG LIVE THE SOVEREIGN HOUSE OF ORANGE’ painted on it. Then followed the members of the P.M.I.A. all dressed in their uniforms with ORANGE sashes from shoulder to waist. This parade stopped for a few minutes in front of the Court House and then continued around the town, with the band playing in front.”

Mr. L.B. Scott was appointed by the colonial government as foreman of the Public Works department of the Windward Island and he filled this position well for over twenty two years before retiring in 1952. There are many buildings and roads in the Windward Islands which are existing monuments to his ability as a builder and a contractor. For example the Methodist Manse in back of the Methodist Church, Mt. William Hill road, the Governor's residence and the Government school on St. Eustatius, the Harbour Building, the old pier and the former Administration Building (now the Library) on Saba. In “De Slag om Slag” of 1938 we can again read: “We understand that Mr. L.B. Scott of this place is expected in St. Eustatius by the following trip of the S.S. Baralt next week to begin the building of these farm houses. Mr. Scott

is also expected to build, while in St.Eustatius, a dwelling house for the Government Agriculturist.”

When he returned from Santo Domingo, L.B.Scott was considered a young “upstart” by the older folks. However, Scott believed that there was a job to be done in St.Martin, and that he was the one to do the job. That conviction, coupled with his great devotion to his mother and his desire to be near her, encouraged this noble son of the soil to “hold on.”

In 1930 at the age of 33 Mr. Scott was given his “big break” when he got the contract to build the Methodist Manse in Philipsburg. This building which stands as a monument to his construction ability, won for him the respect of the older folks.

Mr. Scott served as a member of the Agricultural Association. He was also quite active in public service. He served on the Court of Policy as a member during the colonial system of government. When the Netherlands Antilles acquired autonomy within the framework of the Kingdom of The Netherlands in 1950 he entered active politics. He was elected to the Island Council of the Windward Islands in 1951 and served as a member until his death in 1966.

I have copies of some of the minutes of the Island Council meetings of the early nineteen fifties. Mr. Scott having dealt in construction with Saba people in the Island Council meeting of June 17th, 1954 said: “I think that a raise in wages is fair and I regret that Mr. Lambert Hassell has waited too long to apply for a raise. He said that he had always admired Mr. Hassells’ work and knows that only a Saba man could do what he had done. In the meeting of November 29th, 1951 on a proposal to raise the salary of the Commissioners from one hundred guilders per month to seven hundred, Mr. Scott said: “Mr. President, I think seven hundred a month too high and I propose an amount of five hundred guilders per month be asked for.” Many tax payers today who ridicule excessive government spending would wish to have a man like him still around.

His private life was centered on his estate his family and his horses. His fondness for horses was known throughout the Caribbean and probably acquired during his years in the Dominican Republic. Two of his favourite horses were “Pensamiento” and “Duke” handsome brown stallions. In the newspaper “De Slag Om Slag” of August 1st 1936 we read the following under the headline RACE HORSE IMPORTED:

“On Saturday evening 25th ultimo a mare was landed here which had arrived from St.Eustatius by S.S. Baralt for Mr. L.B.Scott. It is said that Mr. Scott imported this mare to race against the white horse “Apollo”, belonging to the Beauperthuy Brothers.”Apollo” is the horse which won the race on June 24th, while running against Mr. Scott’s horse “Pensamiento.” We hope to see this race on the Queen’s Birthday, August 31st.”

When I was doing research for my book "For the Love of St. Martin", his son Mr. J.F. York shared correspondence he had with his father when he Mr. York was living on Aruba. He knew that I had known Mr. Scott well. I was fascinated by him. When he came to town on one of his horses it was like a Roman emperor of old coming into the city. My first encounter with him was when he came to let me know who of the Receivers he had had problems with in the past. Either they had taxed him too much or sent him the same bill twice in a row and so on. In the meantime he had put his big cowboy hat on the table I was working at and was staring me straight in the eye. I told him that I was only a junior clerk in the Post office and was just helping out here and there. His answer to that was: "I know that you are Johnsons' boy. You have education and ambition. These people in this building are no challenge for you. Just now you will be calling the shots here so I am informing you in advance just in case." It is remarkable that a few months later Lyman Halley came to me and asked me what I had done to Claude. He said that Claude was down at the Lido Bar taking a turn in Fons O'Connor shouting at him to tell him who was the boss in the Court House, he or that so and so Will Johnson. You see how you get a reputation without deserving it?

Much of Mr. Scott's philosophy of life has been preserved thanks to Mr. York sharing those letters which he received from his father while he Mr. York worked for the Lago refinery on Aruba. I would like to share a few excerpts from those letters:

March 25th 1949: "My plans I am sure will be helpful to you all in later years even if I am gone. While we are here we must do something to leave behind when we are gone."

June 21st 1951: There is one thing you can boast about me; whatever I am entrusted to do, I shall do the best of my ability, God being my helper. And rest assured I cannot be bought at no price to do anything that I know is wrong.

May 18th 1955: It is true that everyone should be able to think for themselves, but can they do it? So someone must shoulder the burden to help the less fortunate and I feel that should be the job of those who have the chance of knowing better to help them. What we need is conscientious men to fight this battle ...There is no success without sacrifice.

July 26th 1962: "I am 65 years old and I have plenty to thank God for; if I am not a good father I feel sure I am not the worst...I was working for my mother and her children since I was 14 years and thank God I have nothing to regret... and I am not worthy to thank Him for His grace and mercies to me."

Mr. Scott died on January 6th, 1966. His funeral was described by the Windward Islands Opinion as the largest ever witnessed on the island. Most of the members of the Island council of the Windward Islands attended the funeral, as well as dignitaries from neighbouring islands, among them the Honourable Robert Lewellyn Bradshaw, Premier of St. Kitts-Nevis and Anguilla.

At the gravesite many speeches were made by persons who knew and had worked closely with Mr. Scott. In his speech, the Lt. Governor of the Windward Islands J.J. "Japa" Beaujon, said: "St. Maarten will never forget you, Scott. Rest in peace and, even as you will rise in glory and eternity, your work in St. Maarten will always be gratefully remembered, will expand, and will last."

Mr. Scott was honoured in many ways, while alive and after his death. He was awarded the gold medal attached to the Order of Oranje Nassau by Her Majesty the Queen for his services to the Windward Islands. On January 28th, 1974 the Postal Services issued a Postal stamp in his honour. And on January 28th, 1968 the road leading from the Public cemetery at Little Bay through Cul-de-Sac to Reward estate was officially named the L.B. Scott road.

I wrote in a Curacao newspaper at the time that: "the late Mr. Scott had made himself an inspirational example to the youth of St. Maarten, by linking his name to a road in the district where he was born, grew up and worked for the welfare of his people."

What can we today learn from the life of Mr. Scott you may ask? Each generation is supposed to produce its own leaders based on existing norms and values.

One of the monumental figures of the literature of the whole of human civilizations, Alfred Lord Tennyson, in his epic poem: "The passing of Arthur", wrote:

"The old order changeth, yielding to new,

And God fulfills himself in many ways,

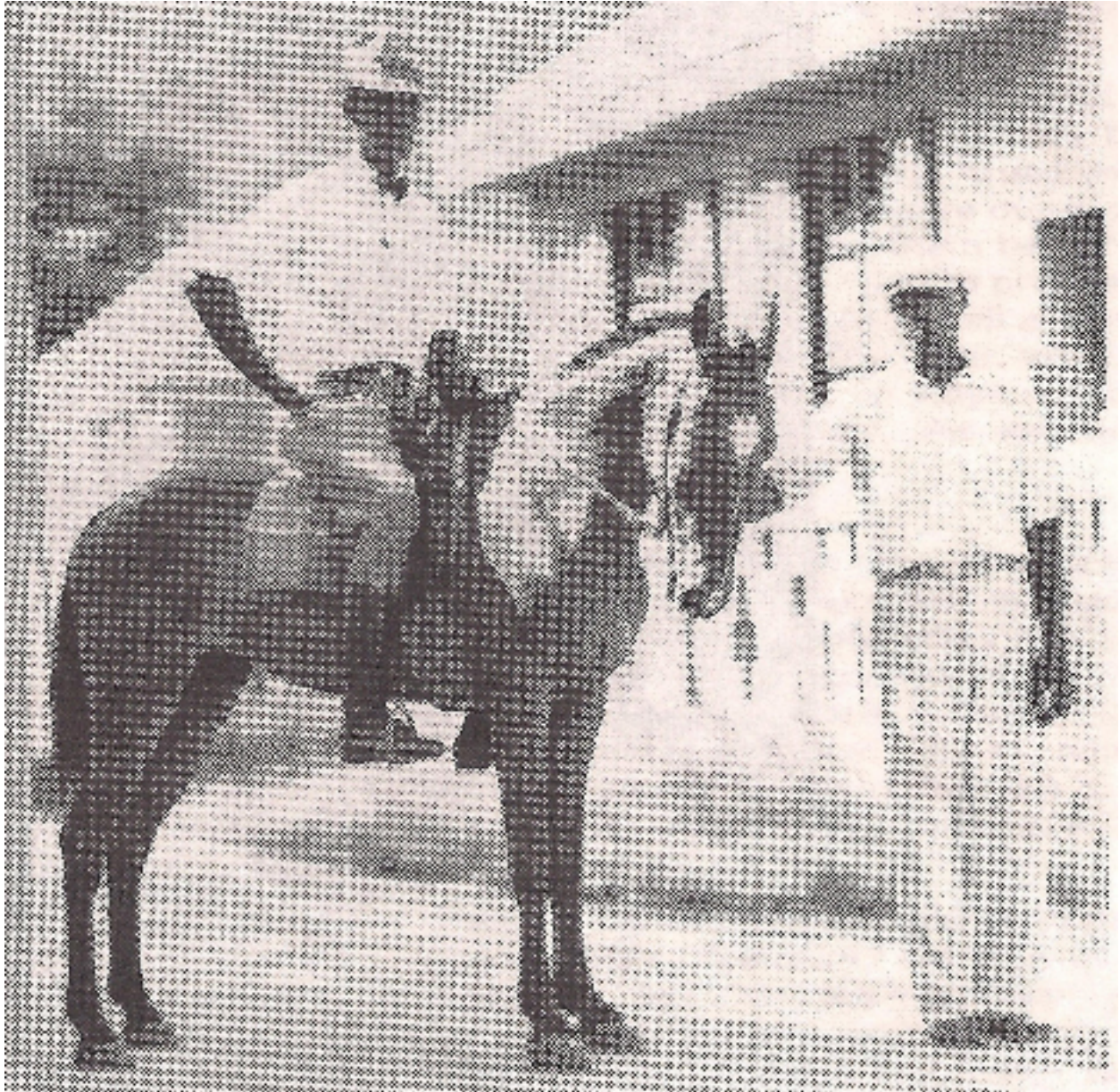
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world."

Mr. Scott's legacy is established and can be studied and emulated. The essential task for young St. Martiners, the new order, is to study the lives of those pioneers who went on before them, and through dedication to purpose, honesty and sacrifice, confront the central issue. The central issue being that the call on St. Maarten today is for fresh thinking, new directions and most of all honest and courageous leadership.

Those same challenges faced Mr. Scott in a different way as a young man, and he met them beyond the expectations of his generation. And that is why so many years after his death we can still pay tribute to him and declare how proud we are to have known this great St. Martin son of the soil.



Old pier at Fort being built with Mr. L.B.Scott standing on the pier. Photo by Steve Kruythoff 1935



Mr. L.B.Scott on horseback with Clement Flemming holding the reins of the horse



Mr. L.B.Scott as a young man in Santo Domingo



Mr. L.B. Scott and his mother Mrs. Eliza Cox