

## The Saga of Captain Richard Hassell

Introduced by Will Johnson

This story was written by Richard Stuart Hassell on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2000 when he was 87 years of age and living in Santa Monica California. He did this at the urging of Brian Mark a friend. Brian had heard Richard telling so many stories about when he grew up on Saba as a boy that he felt these stories should be written down and sent to the island for people here to enjoy. After Richard's death Brian sent the stories to Sea Saba whose site he found on the internet. Lynn Costenaro passed them on to me. I first introduced Richard's (Dick) own life story which was very interesting and now what he informs us of his grandfather the captain. He lived in the house in Windwardside which was torn down to make way for the new Kindergarten and he was related among others to Captain Eddie Hassell of "Swinging Doors" restaurant.

In the foreword the writer tells us:"This story has been written with the knowledge that it is a true story as related to me by my mother who experienced a great deal of it herself and as a youngster and teenager had a lot of it related to her by her mother. There are many seamen who may have had similar experiences, but since I can only write about those of my grandfather, it then becomes a partial history of my family, and is written with a humble pride. Therefore, this story is dedicated to my grandfather for being a man of great courage and that he had the determination to do what he thought was best for him and his family when the odds were against him."

My grandfather Captain Richard Hassell was born on the tiny Dutch island of Saba (only 5 miles square in size) in the year 1856 and whose forbearers settled on Saba in the year 1640.

Since seafaring was the way of life in those days, and the island being so small, the male population by necessity had to go to sea in order to earn a living and support their families. The very young teenagers had to start out going to sea at 13 years of age to follow in their father's footsteps, and were always signed on the ship as the "cabin boy." It was standard practice that the captain had the responsibility of teaching the cabin boy all the rest of the schooling he would be missing by starting out at sea at such an early age. In addition he had to teach him all the rudiments of navigation and seamanship, along with the aid of books on the subject.

As it turned out, my grandfather was a very ambitious man, and so at 16 years of age he decided that he wanted to get married and so he married a Saban girl who happened also to be 16, after receiving the blessings of her parents. One year later my mother was born. Being a father gave my grandfather the impetus to learn more about navigation and seamanship. He studied so hard that at age 21 he had taken the examination for a Captain's license and passed it, whereupon the shipping company for whom he was sailing gave him command of a ship, and so he kept going to sea. It was a customary thing for a shipping company not to allow the prospective captain to take command of a ship without being a part owner which was 25% of what the ship was worth. The shipping company's idea was that the captain of the vessel would be more interested in keeping it in good shape and would look out more for the company's interest if he was a part owner. My grandfather turned out to be a man of good judgment and thrifty with his money because he had built his own home on the island of Saba by the time my mother

was three years old. After having sailed to New York many times my grandfather decided to take his family to live there in the year 1877. After his first son Richard was born my grandmother started to get a little more apprehensive about my grandfather going to sea, particularly after having weathered three hurricanes at sea. He finally relented and found a grocery store in New York City that was for sale and bought it almost immediately. But being a born seaman at heart he put the grocery store up for sale after only two years and eventually sold it to another merchant. He found a small schooner of 46 tons in size and bought it, putting it in seaworthy shape. He began trading up and down the East Coast of the United States and the Caribbean area. He called the vessel the R.H.

My mother having been born in 1872 was about 8 years of age and interested in whatever my grandfather did because my grandmother had gotten in the habit of keeping her informed even at such a young age, particularly about the dangers of going to sea. Although Captain Hassell had some dangerous adventures, one where he was the only survivor, he always returned successfully. But my grandmother was more convinced than ever that she would try to persuade him to give it up. Finally in about 1886 on a particular trip to Jacksonville, Florida, he was approached by a representative of a local shipping company who was interested in buying the R.H. at a price satisfactory to my grandfather. By the following day he found out that an orange grove was for sale located on the St. John's River, not too far from Jacksonville. The price of the orange grove was much less than what he had been offered for the R.H. and so he made up his mind to sell his beloved ship and buy the orange grove.

So he put down a down payment on the orange grove and signed an agreement to sell the R.H. to the shipping company, advising them that he would have to go back to New York City and conclude all business there before returning to Jacksonville and finalizing the sale of the R.H. and purchasing the orange grove. Captain Hassell finally got all the business taken care of in New York and took enough supplies including food and water for 26 days to take him and his family to Jacksonville. After about 3 days at sea, when he was approximately off the coast of Cape Hatteras, the vessel's barometer started to fall rapidly. From his experience with other hurricanes he knew that the telltale signs pointed to trouble – running headlong into another hurricane. He immediately called the crew together and told them that from his past experience with hurricanes he felt it imperative that they prepare. He decided to ride it out. He then ordered the crew to take in all sails except for the jib which he needed to help keep the vessel's bow into the wind. He battened down the hatches. He further asked several crew members to lash him to the helm so that he would not get washed overboard and since his family was on board, he wanted to make sure he and he alone was responsible for bringing the vessel through the hurricane. Many of the crew had asked him to let them spell him at the helm but he would not hear of it. The ship's cook, knowing that he would have to at least have some hot coffee, did manage to hold the coffee pot on the stove long enough to boil the water for the coffee. That was all Captain Hassell had for three days and three nights while the hurricane lasted. But he did bring the R.H. successfully through. After the hurricane was over they found themselves becalmed which lasted for 25 days and my grandfather had supplies for only that period of time. On the 26<sup>th</sup> day he was down to one tin of salmon and some "hard tack," which he chose to give to the crew and sugar water and crackers which he gave to his family. That afternoon, around 3 P.M., a United States warship was seen approaching within a close distance and Captain Hassell put up a distress signal. The warship gave them enough supplies to

get to Jacksonville, which they reached after six days. He then proceeded in finalizing the sale of the R.H. and the purchase of the orange grove, and immediately started to put the orange grove home in better shape, after which he started the trimming of the orange trees. Blossoms sprouted in a month or so, and soon tiny oranges began to appear. My mother said she had never seen him in a better frame of mind. As the oranges started to reach maturity my grandfather envisioned a bumper crop and had by this time decided that being a "landlubber" was not so bad after all. However, his luck was about to run out because the area was hit with one of the heaviest frosts in years and the whole crop was lost. He went bankrupt. Wasting no time, he checked in Jacksonville about possible other jobs and as luck would have it; he found out that the Jacksonville lumber company had a three master schooner that needed a captain. He applied for the job and got it. The lumber company gave him all the information that was necessary including the fact that he would have to run the vessel on shares of the profits, which he readily agreed to. After taking command of the vessel his first trip was to Trinidad with a load of lumber. He took his family and dropped them off at the island of Saba where he still owned his own home, and he continued on to Trinidad. My mother, now having reached the age of 17, had started to teach a small kindergarten class of children to help out as much as she could until her father had received his first share of the profit. Soon my Uncle Richard had reached the age of 13 and immediately went to sea as a cabin boy with an uncle of his who was captain of a 4 master square rigged ship. In the meantime, my grandfather continued to carry lumber to Trinidad and on one particular trip, after he had taken his first sight of shooting the sun, in the morning around 10 o'clock he laid down to rest. In the afternoon, just before he shot the sun again (around 3 o'clock) he called the mate and told him he was not feeling well and that he felt like he was going to die. He said if he did, he did not want his body buried at sea, but to take tar and tar his body, wrap it in canvas, folding it over and over, and put it in the ship's hold. He gave the mate the course to steer after having taken his second shot of the sun, and found his position according to his calculation of the latitude and longitude, and that if they stayed on course as he told them they would come to Barbados where he wished to be buried, and so he was.

The crew then sailed the vessel to the island of Saba where they related all the details of what had occurred. When my grandmother, Rebecca, heard it, she told my mother that six months from that date she would not be alive and let herself grieve to death. My mother then had to take over the responsibility for her younger brother Camille who was only five years of age at the time (+\_1892). After my mother reached 20 years of age (1896) she felt that she could better provide for her brother and herself by going back to New York City and with her uncle being captain of a sailing ship he stopped at the island of Saba, packed them up, and sailed for New York. Since she knew no one in New York City, she decided after a year to go to Providence, Rhode Island, where she had relatives.

My father had fallen in love with my mother after her mother died, but she did not get to see him too often because of his going to sea. When his ship stopped at Providence, he heard from other relatives that my mother was now living there and he went to see her. They decided to marry and did so in January of the year 1902. My brother was born in December 1902. Soon after, my mother decided to go back to Saba for a short time but that never happened, as she stayed much longer. My sister Caroline (Carry) and I were born on Saba which is a place I can never forget, as small as it was.

As this story has been written primarily about my grandfather I deem it to be my duty that it is centered on him. I wish to add that nothing has given me greater pleasure than to try to recall all of the information that comprises the Saga of Captain Richard Hassell." END.

As I was typing out this article I thought of the hundreds of Saban captains and other men of the sea who would have had similar stories which went unrecorded and that Saba can truly be called "Isle of a thousand sea tales."

Will Johnson