

CYRUS WILBERFORCE WATHEY

By: Will Johnson

Alrett Peters of the General Workers Union used the word “Partner” a lot when he spoke to me and I assume he did so with others as well. One day when we were stenciling the newspaper the “Labour Spokesman” at the Union Hall in Cole Bay he said to me: “Partner you see how he mother spelled the man’s name WILL – BE – FORCE.” I said to him;” Mr. Peters, I don’t think it spelled like that you know.” “Well, anyway,” he said “she must have intended to put that thought in his brain”. I explained him about William Wilberforce in England who fought for the abolishing of the slave trade and the fact that the Wathey’s were Methodists. . A strange thing for the development of the Methodist Church on St. Martin was that most of the leading white families of the day were Methodists. In the Caribbean and especially in the Dutch islands it was mostly the Catholics who attracted the former slaves to their ranks. The wealthy whites in the Dutch islands were Dutch reformed and the poor whites were either Catholic, or Anglican. The Methodists in the rest of the Caribbean fought for the slaves to be part of their church and looked after their wellbeing. The white planters on islands like St. Eustatius fought very hard against the Methodists getting a foothold on that island. So it is strange that on St. Maarten the leading white families like the Van Romondts, Illidges, Gibbes, Richardsons and the Wathey’s were the pillars of the Methodist Church. I used to tease Vance James and would ask him if Claude was up to date. That would bring a laugh and he would confirm that Claude religiously paid his membership dues to the Methodist church. Cyrus’ father’s home was located right across from the Methodist Church with his business place downstairs. In the nineteen forties it was rented to

Mr. Medero a Curacao police officer married to a Saba Lady, Ms. Olive Hassell (still alive). A kerosene fridge caused a fire and the house burned down. My brother Freddie used to tell me that as a boy he could see the fire from all the way here on Saba where we lived at Behind-The-Ridge. I remember that Mr. "CY" had an ice factory there and I would help Mr. Frederic Froston to carry large blocks of ice in saw dust and straw in his taxi to the St. John's Ranch for the traditional Saturday night "Bullfight", which was not a bullfight but a dance party.



The old De Ruyter Square now named after Mr. Cyrus Wathey, and the house in the left corner was the home of L.A. van Romondt and bought by Mr. Cyrus where he lived and died.

Cyrus Wilberforce Wathey was born on St. Martin on November 9th, 1901. He died on April 15th, 1969. He was the fourth of the six children family of Albert Coenraad Wathey and Susan Augusta Williams. Two of Cyrus' brothers died young, Alfred Conrad at the age of 26 and Marius Claudius at the age of 22. His sister Eustelle Praxedes married Edgar Hassell of Saba. Cyrus first attended school on St. Martin and continued

his education on St. Kitts, where he went to the secondary school of the “St. Kitts Grammar School.”



The two storey building is the home of Mr. Cyrus Wathey and his business downstairs. This burned down in the nineteen forties.

Following his final exam he returned to his native island and started his business activities. In those days there was hardly any commercial activity on the island of St. Martin. Nevertheless he succeeded in establishing various companies whose purpose was to stimulate the economy of St. Martin, which he brilliantly accomplished. Cyrus was very much loved in the community. He acquired a reputation and admiration because of the fact that he was an honest, hard working and devoted person. He had the greatest confidence in St. Martin and was of the opinion that with determination and initiative the island could be helped forward. And then to think that in those times that which St. Martin exported the most was its own people, who went to work abroad in order by so doing to send money home. Mr. Cyrus

Wathey was generally known for the help that he offered to the less advantaged. He would often provide people with food parcels from his business, which mostly was done on credit, although he knew that payment were in many cases never to follow. His mother died at the age of 50 in 1918, and his father A.C. Wathey (54) in 1920 remarried to Miss Ada Beatrice Davis (28). On June 5th, 1922 Mr. "CY" then 20 married Mavis Ardath Davis (24) the younger sister of Miss Ada. After A.C. Wathey died in 1945 Miss Ada continued living on the same property with Claude and his family until she died in the nineteen sixties. I remember her having a tame pelican in the yard which would fly away in the morning and return at night.

Cyrus ran his businesses together with his two sons, Chester and Claude. Even during the difficult years of the Second World War, when food articles were very scarce, he still succeeded in providing the island with the necessary items by trading with the neighboring islands. His spirit of sacrifice and his helpfulness were proverbial. He had a ready ear for the needs of his neighbor and was always prepared and ready to assist his fellow man in word and deed without thinking of what was in it for him.

In recognition of his merits Mr. Cyrus Wilberforce Wathey was made a Companion in the Order of Oranje-Nassau by Her Majesty the Queen of the Netherlands.

When I started working in the Postoffice in the Old Courthouse in Philipsburg, it was not long after that I got to know Mr. "CY" as he was affectionately called. I got to know him as a person. He was a big teaser. I remember one night walking up from Sea View Hotel headed home to Capt. Hodge's Guesthouse to the head of town. In those days

there was no traffic after 8pm. It must have been around 9pm and I had had a bit too much to drink and was swaying a bit when suddenly a car came along and stopped just below Mr. "CY's" house. The Dutch lady driving the car knew me and asked if I wanted a lift. It wasn't far but I took the ride anyway.

A few days later when I saw Mr. Wathey he was full of remarks about this young fellow being given a midnight tour of the town and so on. He did this when his regular group was in attendance in front of his shop. His regular pals were Mr. Louis Emile "Lil Dan" Beauperthuy who would come in from French Quarter a couple of times a week, Mr. Aubrey Cannegieter who had his business the "Oranje Café" next door, Mr. Alphonse "Fons" O'Connor, the local Judge, Receiver, Postmaster, my boss etc.etc., and the Roman Catholic Priest Father Boradori. The off-colour jokes would be in full swing when Father Boradori was not around. Every time he saw me it would be some remark or the other about the lady who gave me the lift. "I hear you driving out in the country now, etc." The problem was that he used to sit at his window above the street until it was time to go to bed and could observe anything going on in the street below.

He was also fond of an early morning sea bath. I remember him going down to the beach early in the morning to get his swim before business started. Mr. Clarence Conner of Anguilla worked for him in the grocery store, while Mr. Wathey worked in his office. He was agent for Shell, Philips, KLM, KNSM and his agencies grew to untold numbers as St. Martin started to grow in the nineteen sixties. It seems like yesterday that I stood in the square named now after Mr. "CY" witnessing the opening of the Windward Islands Bank Ltd., which was an initiative of Mr. Cy and the Maduro Bank on Curacao. I had started working for the

Government in the Old Courthouse on October 10th, 1960 and the bank opened in November. Fifty years have gone by in what seems like a second. He often told me the story of how Clarence had fooled himself. The new Receiver, Mr. Schotborgh back in the early nineteen fifties when Income Tax was restarted in the Windward Islands wanted to prove to his superiors on Curacao that there was some money to be collected on St. Martin. So one day he went over to Mr. Wathey's office to get information on Clarence. In those days Clarence's salary would have been less than twenty five guilders a month. However since business was slow he allowed Clarence to do his work as a tailor while working in the shop. Clarence in the next room overheard Mr. Wathey giving a ridiculous low wage that he was being paid and he told Mr. Schotborgh that Clarence hardly ever sold pants, let alone a suit. Well Clarence decided he had to defend himself and called out from the store to Mr. Schotborgh, "Mr. Wathey only pulling your leg, I does make so and so, and some months I can sell up to five suits and ten pants." And so Clarence became one of the first tax payers under the new tax regime. Mr. "CY" used to tell that story often as to how he was covering up for Clarence but that Clarence had given himself away.

Back when he started out he was a mechanic and sold bicycles which were much in demand on St. Martin in those days and he also repaired them. His father A.C. Wathey was the agent for General Motors and was the second person to import a car, a Chevrolet, to the island in 1914. The first car was a Ford also imported in 1914 by Lewis A. van Romondt. The competition for economic and political supremacy on St. Martin had begun. Sydney Lejuez used to tell me that the slogan of the van Romondt's was to keep the Wathey's down street where they belonged.

By the nineteen thirties the van Romondt family was in decline and the Wathey family in the ascendancy. In the newspaper “De Slag om Slag” of July 24th, 1937, # 127, the newspaper had the following notice.

Firm L.A. van Romondt’s Sons

The commercial firm L.A. van Romondt’s sons was permanently closed last week. Mr. L.A. van Romondt on account of ill health sold out his half interest to his partner Mr. L.C. Fleming, and Mr. Fleming again sold to Mr. C.W. Wathey. The two partners, van Romondt and Fleming, continue the exploration of the salt ponds, on the French and Dutch side of this island, and the estate Madam’s, under the name L.A. van Romondt’s sons.

“De Slag om Slag” of July 31st, 1937 # 128 gives final evidence that not only had the Wathey’s made it up street but in doing so had also captured the Van Romondt empire.

N O T I C E

The undersigned begs to announce that he has bought out the mercantile firm of Messrs. L.A. van Romondt’s Sons; the business will be carried on as formerly under my own name. I further beg to announce that I have been appointed Agent of the ROYAL NETHERLANDS STEAMSHIP CO., at this place.

July 29th, 1937

Cyrus W. Wathey

In 1986 then Minister Leo Chance appointed me to represent the Windward Islands on the stamp committee of the Postal Services. One of those who I successfully recommended for a stamp to be issued in

his name was Mr. "CY". On March 29th, 1989 I sent a letter to the Postmaster General advising that in 1990 Mr. Wathey should be honoured. I said that I had considered this candidate over possible other nominees for that year because of his varied activities in the business world. These activities gave direct employment to more than 200 people at the time of his death and indirectly to hundreds more.

However the stamp did not come about until September 1st, 1992. A reception was held at the San Marco restaurant, under his former home on the square in Philipsburg named in his honour and the invitation reads that: "The Postal Service of the Netherlands Antilles in conjunction with the Wathey family has the honor to invite you to a presentation of a special stamp dedicated to the late Mr. Cyrus Wilberforce Wathey. His son Senator Claude Wathey and the other family Members were present and his grandson Norman Wathey made a speech on behalf of the family. The Chronicle newspaper's editor at the time my friend Mr. Erasmus Williams carried the speech in its edition of September 2nd, 1992. Norman said: "He believed in St. Martin. He believed that if other islands had those commercial activities then why not St. Martin." Norman said that it was the thinking that was important as probably at the time many thought it was useless to conduct business but he proved them wrong "and in the process he gave the island the basic commercial activities needed for any economy to grow." Norman said it is this type of determination and stubbornness that is needed by the present St. Martin generation. Many might consider Cyrus Wathey a man before his time but he was doing in his generation the things that he considered relevant. "The same foresight he had in business is the same foresight we must apply today." He gave the assurance that the Wathey clan will "uphold the principles of Cyrus

Wathey and act as stubborn, determined and at the same time go about our business in a fair and sincere way as our grandfather did. Pa blazed the trail, we must now pave it.” Norman said. In closing he expressed gratitude to Saban Senator Will Johnson “for proposing my grandfather for the stamp,” as well as Minister of Traffic and Communications Desta Nisbeth and postal authority officials. Dr. Claude Wathey said: “I am very proud of my father today. When my brother Chester started his business I stayed and continued in business with my father until I got too active in politics. There are many, many memories of my father and myself together,” said Claude Wathey. “ He was a very withdrawn guy and he would be embarrassed that he was being honoured, but I am sure that he would have enjoyed it anyhow,” said Claude when asked how his father would have felt if he was alive.

Mr. CY’s two daughters were Jewel (married to Dr. Carl Levendag) and Dorothy (married to Mr. Frank Jansen who managed the Windward Island’s Bank Ltd.)

Mr. “CY” died on April 15th, 1969 after a short illness.