

In Memory of Frederick Froston .

(October 8, 1914 –September 7th, 1988)

By; Will Johnson

Of course you must have known Frederick (pronounced Federeek) Froston. Unless you are not from St. Martin, that is. An unlikely hero, yet he epitomized all that was good in the old St. Martin. To many he was just a taxi-driver. He was the driver of M-16. At a time when hardly anyone on St. Martin made a living from driving a taxi, Frederick took care of all those who came from the neighbouring islands. Those were the only “tourists” back then.

Over the years he became an institution. Nearly everyone from Saba and St. Eustatius knew Frederick. And each one in their own way has stories to tell about Frederick. When someone from Saba arrived at St. Martin’s airport, the other taxi drivers identified them as “Frederick’s people.”

He lived in town. Great Bay as he called it. He was originally from the French side and over there they still refer to Philipsburg as “Great Bay” which is the correct name for the harbor. The house he lived in had formerly belonged to Carol Labega, close to the “Oranje” School and on the Front street facing the beach. Among the many things he did he also sold lottery tickets, and he won the grand prize once, or part of it.

I cannot remember correctly. Immediately word went out that he had lost the ticket. He told me years later: “You think I’s a fool eh! All a dem would ah want part oh it!” The property he bought with his winning included a two-storied house and it cost all of three thousand guilders. Beach property back then in Philipsburg was less than property on Backstreet. No sun tanning then, only worries about tidal waves and hurricanes, and Backstreet was farthest removed from such calls of nature. Frederick was a practical joker and many are the jokes he pulled on people. Among friends his escapades are legendary. In his old age he was honoured by the Lions Club of Saba. The Saba Island Government also proposed his name to be honoured with a medal by Her Majesty the Queen, and he received this medal on St. Martin.

At the time of his death I could not make it to his funeral as I was stuck on Curacao and I published the eulogy I had wanted to make as an article in the “Saba Herald” and in “The Chronicle” on St. Martin. So many people have asked me to put my St. Martin father “Under The Sea Grape Tree”, that I feel obliged to once again bring him to the attention of a much wider audience now in the Eastern Caribbean.

This is the eulogy which I wrote at the time of his death: “He was the “alpha” and the “omega” for the Saba people. The first and the last. The first person on St. Martin, to meet you, the last person to send you off.

In former times when Saba children had to travel to St. Martin by boat, we were told by our parents; “Never mind, Frederick will be the first person you will see there on the wharf.” All Saba knew Frederick’s car number “M-16.” And, without fail, when you landed on the wharf, seasick and exhausted from the trip, Frederick would be there, in his own way, half worrying, half joking, with “Eh, eh, lil feller, - man, you white in dee face.” “Better get you to Miss Browlia’s quick.”

Miss Browlia Maillard, a former schoolteacher living on Backstreet, took in boarders from Saba and Statia into her home. Although only a stones throw away from the wharf Frederick huddled you into his taxi and carried you across town to Miss Browlia's. For many who left Saba for the first time before 1950 this was an experience in itself, as Saba before 1947 had no motor vehicles of any kind.

By the time you reached Miss Browlia's, Frederick knew all your business and was already a familiar person in your life. By next day when he passed around and asked if you wanted to go out into the "country" with him, you felt as if you had known him all your life.

Going out into the "country", or to Marigot, with Frederick is yet another story. I remember when St. Martin had 83 motor vehicles on the island. Although traffic was minimal in those days, and I remember many times going to Marigot with Frederick and never meeting one car coming to Philipsburg, yet it would take the better part of an hour to get there. Frederick's taxi was like the Maribor train which runs through South Australia with supplies to outlying railroad towns and sheep stations. The train makes stops all along the long route. There is a dentist on board who pulls teeth at different stops. There is a grocery on board a post office and so on. In the back of Frederick's "taxi" there would be hog food to be delivered first to a house next to Miss Ela Brown in the Little Bay area of Cul-de-Sac. While there to my great surprise he would be scolding the children running around the yard, even picking up one and giving the child a good beating. On my enquiry as to how he could lick the people's children, he laughed and said "But they's mine, you know. I have nine by this lady". By the time Frederick finished rattling of how many children he had, and by whom, you reckoned that he had fathered half the country. In later years, in teasing him, I would exaggerate the number to others present and state that the true number was 63. He would get a good laugh out of that, "Lord no, Will, you know that all I have is 20." On St. Martin in the good old days that was considered a small family for a man about town. I once asked another good friend of mine to bring a list of his children to my office so that he could get a reduction in his taxes; he looked perplexed and exclaimed "Man what a job you have given me." When he returned a week later with a list of 48 people I thought he had not heard me correctly and instead had taken a census of the village of Middle Region where he lived. But after much enquiry and explanation it was established that indeed all 48 of those people listed were his children. So Frederick's offspring were small by comparison.

Next stop was at Miss Ela Brown's to drop off empty bottles and to pick up milk for delivery. In addition to this in the trunk of his taxi he had a big bathtub of fish which he sold for the Simpson bay friends of his. A strap of fish sold for 12 good cents. You would probably pay twenty dollars for a similar strap of fish today. If you bought a strap for 15 cents you got a lobster for free. People would tell Frederick, "Man go fire yoh backside. What oi goin to do with a lobster? Give me the strap for 12 cents man." Lobsters back then were so plentiful that people used them for feeding their hogs.

And so stop after stop would be made. Pick up a letter here to mail; drop off a parcel there, and the occasional passenger would be incidental to his mission. If you did see a car on the road Frederick would put his hand over his eyes and be on the lookout as if a pirate ship was coming to capture M-16. Once we stopped to talk at 10Am to Mr. Ferdinand Beauperthuy who was going to "Great Bay" to mail a letter to his son in New York. Each wanted to know from the other where they were going at that ungodly

hour of the day. In Marigot there would be a series of messages to be done for folks in Great Bay and orders received for messages to be done in Great Bay on return. By the time you arrived back at Miss Browlia's it seemed as if you had been on an extraordinary excursion.

If you stayed a week on St. Martin Frederick would be stopping every day to enquire about you and to tease, "Boy you find a gal friend yet?", and, "Miss Browlia, keep an eye on tha lil feller, I see him watching dee girls dem in Margigot, you know." I was twelve at the time.

Finally my day arrived to go to Curacao on the big KLM DC-3. Frederick would pass by at the crack of dawn to remind you (as if you did not know already) that at such and such an hour the plane would be coming and that he would be there long beforehand to pick you up. How long beforehand he never said so at the crack of dawn you would be dressed and ready to go and anxiously on the lookout for Fredericks return.

When finally the time came to go aboard the plane, in the excitement you had forgotten that in a special paper wrapped up in your pocket, you had the money your parents had given you with which to pay Frederick. He would never ask for payment, so when you did remember and asked him what you owed him, he would either give you a ridiculous high figure to scare the wits out of you or tell you the true figure; "Meh, boy, I does charge dee big people dem five guilders but a lil feller like you a dollar (two guilders and fifty cents in those days) will do." That was for a week or more of transportation and adventure with M-16. As you shook his hand to tell him good-bye he would say "Here meh boy, take this twenty cents (fifty cents now), you may need it in Curacao." And with admonishments to you to do your best in school and other such stern lectures he would stand around until the KLM taxied off with 32 passengers, two stewardesses for its nearly four hour flight to Curacao.

A year later, as soon as you stepped off the plane Frederick would be there fussing over you, "Eh, eh, look like dee girls dem in Curacao treat you good, you get tall. I hope you do your lessons though and not only run after dee girls dem." And he would be rightfully proud when you told him that you had gone over to another class.

If you had to leave in the early morning hours for Saba, whether it was at 2 am or 5am Frederick would be there an hour beforehand waking you up with "come me lee feller, time to get you down to the Blue Peter. Captain Hodge say he leaving early this mornin."

When schooldays were over and I started working at the Post office in the old Courthouse, Frederick fussed over me and the others from Saba as if we all belonged to him.

I remember when the Lions honoured him on Saba some years before he died. The honorable Lt. Governor Wycliffe Smith recalled how as a boy he used to be afraid of Frederick. We were all afraid of Frederick. As a grown man I drank too much and on occasion acted in a stupid way. Frederick would run me all over town until he caught up with me. "Man you mek me shamed. Wuh man how you could do that?" By the time Frederick was finished scolding me I was truly repentant.

Many were the joys we shared in doing community work. Frederick was the “Chief Cook and Bottle Washer” at the St. Rose hospital for the royal wages of TEN GUILDERS per month. Together he and I took care of the sick from Saba and together we buried the dead. Fredrick would pretend to those who did not know them that he was the doctor and pull all sorts of pranks on them. I remember once an old lady named “Merzelita Every” who died from burn wounds. Frederick and I buried her by ourselves as the only bearers, with the Reverend father and one altar boy taking care of the services. Once in the church when we were about to bury a sailor named “Preacher” suddenly there was a loud knocking from the coffin. On insistence of his sister the service was stopped and we had to open the coffin. “Preacher” was as dead as a door nail. As we carried him down the front street in the ambulance which also served as a hearse and which Frederick also drove for ten guilders a month, the knocking started again. Coffin opened once more. “Preacher” dead, everyone agreed. As we were about to put the coffin into the ground, whatever djinns were in the coffin only then started to knock like crazy. Frederick looked at Allan Busby and me and informed us: “Knock all you want me boy but the joke is over and in the grave you are now going.” So said so done and perhaps “Preacher” or the djinns still knocking.

As the Holy Koran states: “Bismillahir ramahir raheem al-hamdu lil-lahi rab-bil “alameen ar rahma nir raheem maliki yawed-deen.” (In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the most merciful. Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds, mankind, djinns and all that exists.) I only hope that the djinns in “Preacher’s” coffin had a satisfactory answer to Allah as to why they tried to confuse Frederick and all of us into believing that “Preacher” was still alive in the coffin.

I think it was Aristotle who said:” I don’t do dead bodies.” I remember once sitting with Alan Busby on the wall of the old “Lands radio” Building on the Backstreet. All of a sudden in the distance we saw M-16 mashing five coming down the road past Miss Browlia’s place. Alan jumped up and started in the direction of the back of the build with an “I’m out of here.” I called out to him; “Why?” He said” Man! cannot handle dead bodies today”. Frederick stopped the car and said to me;”Where he gone? “Who,” I asked? “Alan? I need you boys to help me with an old lady. Her legs are up in the air and we can’t get them down so she can fit in the coffin.” I go then to the back of the building. “How did you know Frederick want us to handle a dead body?” Alan seemed to have the ability to predict these sort of things. Anyway we decided to go with Frederic to the morgue at the back of the hospital where now all sorts of people congregate for cocktails not knowing how many dead spirits lurking around there. I never knew until then how hard it was to get stiff legs straightened out. No wonder they refer to a dead person as a” stiff”. It was then that I adopted the Aristotle philosophy even though I never realized it at the time. But when I read it, I was convinced that back in good old Athens there was a chariot driver who must have been a Frederick character and who had tried to convince Aristotle to help him to straighten out a stiff. Or was it Plato?

In his last years Frederick suffered much, but he bore his afflictions gracefully. At the end of July 1988 I said to my wife, “I feel ashamed that I have not seen Frederick for so long.” So I took my two eldest sons, and said to them: “Come along, I want Daddy’s friend to know you.” As we sat there talking, he sitting in the wheelchair, with both legs having been amputated due to the diabetes, he kidded around

with the children; “Will, me son, watch out for those lil fellers, they look like they already like dee girls dem.”

As I turned off, after sitting with him for over an hour, we shook hands, a second time. I said “Frederick, keep your chin up.” He said “Me boy, I don’t think I got too much longer here.” And although he looked well in body, I believed him. I called out to him from the car twice before taking off, then blowed the car horn and bid him a final farewell.

When I received the news of his death I told my children. Their reaction pleased me; they were genuinely saddened and reacted in disbelief at the news of his death. I did not have to say anything. They said to me; “Daddy you have lost a good friend.” Yes indeed, I had.

He told me that as a young boy he had grown up on Belvedere Estate when it belonged to Johannes van Romondt and was a working sugar cane plantation. He had gone from that era to a time that St. Martin was under siege by people from all over the world. The world he knew and loved had changed so much that the strength he needed to fight his illness had disappeared and he was ready to leave this new world which he was unaccustomed to.

As I said before, duty called me to Curacao and I could not be on hand to do the eulogy at the funeral. Another friend Mr. Frank Hassell was there to see him off and Senator Kenneth van Putten and others from the neighbouring islands. I now believe that it was meant to be that way. Frederick wanted me to convey to you the reader, on behalf of the people of Saba, what a genuine man, what a true friend he was to the people of Saba and the other islands in this part of the Eastern Caribbean. “Surely Goodness and mercy will follow him and in God’s house for evermore, his dwelling place shall be.” So long Frederick.



