

DONKEY ON WHEELS

BY: Will Johnson

Few people realize today what a sea change it meant for Saba when the first motor vehicle arrived on the island. Saba was at least 30 years behind the rest of the islands as St. Maarten already had two cars in 1914. The first car on St. Maarten was a Ford belonging to Louis A. van Romondt; some months later a second car arrived, a Chevrolet for Mr. A.C. Wathey, (Claude's grandfather).

On Saba in 1923 when a merchant imported a donkey from St. Eustatius to bring up his cargo from the Fort Bay to The Bottom the porters went on strike as they considered this modern form of transportation to be harmful to their ages long profession of bringing from a barrel of beef to a grand piano up on their heads from Fort Bay to all parts of the island.



One aspect associated with bringing a motor vehicle to Saba which we seldom think about is the planning which went into how to bring the vehicle safely to shore. One has to remember that Saba at the time had no such thing as a harbor. On a calm day the Fort Bay was very rough in comparison to the Great Bay on St. Maarten. Also the road network only extended from Fort Bay to The Bottom and had only been completed on October 16th, 1943. Photo's accompanying this story will serve to demonstrate the difficulty in unloading a vehicle in rough waters in the open sea and bringing it safely to shore. We do not even know who came up with the idea to lash two lighter-boats together and to place on top of these boats a wooden platform to hold the vehicle. Then the two boats on arrival in the heavy surf and rocky shore would have to be turned around to take the pounding of the waves. Two hastily placed wooden ramps would be placed against the boats and the vehicle with driver already in place would make its descent into the rocks and assisted by boatmen and other volunteers would be hauled up through the rocks to a dry spot under the cliff. Miracle of miracles, between 1947 and 1974, after which

motor vehicles were landed on the pier, a couple of hundred motor vehicles were landed without major incident in this fashion.

Many stories have been told about the first JEEP's arrival and the impact it had on the population. In 1947 Saba had a population of 1150. The islands maritime tradition was long behind us. The Captains and their families from The Bottom, St. John's and Windwardside had migrated to Barbados, Bermuda and the United States in the first thirty years of the twentieth century. Shortly after that people started going to Curacao and especially Aruba. A good number of those who lived here in 1947 had never even been off-island and had certainly never seen such a thing as a motor-vehicle a so called "donkey on wheels."



Formerly the Lt. Governors kept a sort of daily journal. The arrival of the Jeep was of such importance that then Vice Lt. Governor Max Huith (the title of the job back then "Onder Gezaghebber), carefully noted down enough of the event that we can enjoy reading about it today. The event was that important that the Lt. Governor of the Windward Islands came along with the M.S. "Kralendijk" to obviously be a part of Saba's history. He must have realized that Saba would no longer be the same in the future.

We quote from Vice Lt. Governor Max Huith's Journal:

Monday 17 March 1947;

This afternoon at around 5.15 pm, arrived with the M.S. "Kralendijk" from St. Maarten Mr. P.H. van Leeuwen, Lt. Governor of the Windward islands, R.J.Beaujon Jr., Director L.V.V., Drs. J.H. van Boven, Director of the Department of Social and Economic Affairs; Mother Vicar of the Dominican Nuns; Mother Prioress Sebastina Fay, Mother Vicaria Candida, and Prioress Amalia.

On that same occasion a JEEP, coming from the Department of Public Works on Curacao and destined for this island arrived. In the afternoon the necessary preparations were made in connection with the unloading of this means of transportation.



After having welcomed the Lt. Governor, those who had arrived went to The Bottom, where, at the home of the undersigned, refreshments were served.

Tuesday March 18th 1947;

At 6.30 AM went to the Fort Bay, to try to get the "JEEP" rolling. In the beginning the motor refused to start, so that the undersigned went back to The Bottom by horse for discussions with the Lt. Governor of the Windward Islands. In the meantime the Captain and the Engineer of the M.S. "Kralendijk" had worked on the JEEP, and finally for the first time in the history of Saba, a motor vehicle was driven via the Fort bay road over the roads of The Bottom. The enthusiasm of the people, especially the children, was great. It is a pity that mentioned JEEP before being shipped had not been thoroughly checked by Public Works. It became apparent that the gasoline line was blocked; gasoline pump did not function; the lights did not work; battery empty and handbrake not working. All of this, according to the Captain and Engineer of the M.S. "Kralendijk". Also Mr. R.J. Beaujon Jr., Director of L.V.V. who in connection with the "refusal" of the JEEP had made a special trip from The Bottom to the Fort bay, has also observed these defects.

In the course of the morning the Governments special breed chickens were visited. In the afternoon discussions were held with the Lt. Governor of the Windward Island and the Director of Social and Economic Affairs and Director of Agriculture, Stock raising and Fisheries on a number of subjects. In the late afternoon the new road between The Bottom and St. John's was inspected by the Lt. Governor and the undersigned. The Lt. Governor expressed his satisfaction with this road.



Wednesday March 19th, 1947:

This morning at around 8 o'clock Lt. Governor of the Windward Islands and entourage left with the M.S. "Kralendijk" to St. Eustatius. They were accompanied by the undersigned to the Fort bay. At 9 o'clock back to The Bottom and carried out office work. In the afternoon the schoolboys from The Bottom were given the opportunity to take a ride in the JEEP through The Bottom. These children were overjoyed when for the first time in their life they were privileged to experience something like this. "Look how fast the trees are passing us," one of the children shouted. "Who would have thought this", said an old lady, who begged to be taken for a ride also. The boys were given turns in groups of five or six. This is the extent of what the "onder Gezaghebber" had to tell on the arrival of the first JEEP on Saba. Mr. Oliver "Ally" Zagers of Hell's Gate who had learned to drive while working in Bermuda had the privilege to bring the first motor vehicle on shore. In 1938 when the road to The Bottom from the Fort Bay was started, the three labourers who broke out the first steps were my grandfather James Horton Simmons, "Lee Thomas" Hassell (Senator Ray Hassell's grandfather) and Norman Hassell the latter who is yet among the living. Today there are nearly 900 motor vehicles of all kinds on Saba. The motor vehicles made a great change in the life of the people of this island, which in many ways has been a blessing and in others a curse.



In my book "Tales from My Grandmother's Pipe" I tell the story of my first experience with the JEEP. I had heard the bigger boys' talking about what I thought was a new SHEEP that the Government had ordered. As can be seen from Mr. Huith's Journal the highlight of the Lt. Governor's visit was to pay a courtesy visit to the Government's new chickens, so that a new sheep would have not been unusual.

Anyway on arrival in The Bottom I saw at the Government Wireless Radio Station some sheep grazing which was not unusual. The Bottom still has issues with goats grazing. I was not at all impressed with the sheep. We had bigger ones than that at home. That is until we got down by the Anglican Church and Mr. Huith had decided to inspect the new road being built in the direction of St. John's. Well you can imagine the terror of hearing the motor and seeing this "donkey on wheels" headed in my direction. Jet plane could not overtake my flight to the nearest mango tree and in between my tears I saw Mr. Huith and his machine which I had mistaken for a sheep flying around the corner.

People from other islands made fun of us of course. They said that people had brought packs of grass for the JEEP to eat and so on. For people in the other villages like Windwardside it took some years before they saw the JEEP. Old people who could not get around and had never been off-island and in some cases had never even visited another village, had to wait until Calvin Holm broke down the Government's barrier and rode the first Jeep into Windwardside in 1952, and so there was no official ceremony. Calvin made it as far as where the Big Rock market is now and had to back up all the way to Over-the-Peak before the alarm was sounded to the Police Station in The Bottom that Calvin had broken the barricade and had driven into Windwardside illegally. For the Government a problem but for us young boys Calvin had made our day. In the beginning we used to think that the only motor vehicles in the world were JEEPS. Following that one of the Governments, Arthur Anslyn brought in one from Aruba, and also Alvin "Bobby" Every, followed by a JEEP pickup for the Government to help bring materials for the road and then Mrs. Elaine Hassell (wife of road builder Lambert Hassell) brought in a NASH car. In 1953 until 1955 when I left the island for school on Curacao I still had to walk to and from school in The Bottom. It was only in the last few months of school in 1955 that we could catch a lift with the Government's pickup. Some years ago when I was Commissioner I had much trouble getting money out of State Secretary De Vries to buy some new school busses. Every day it seemed that more forms

had to be filled in and questions to be answered. Finally as to why we needed new school busses, I informed the State Secretary that the donkey which transported the children to school had died of old age and that we wanted to go over to a more modern form of transportation. Well it was not too long after that five brand new Toyota “Donkey-on-Wheels” arrived on Saba to transport the schoolchildren. And so now you know.

