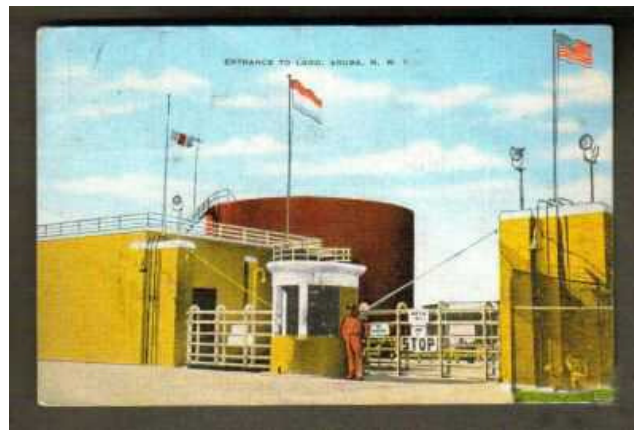


Going to work for LAGO

By: Will Johnson

Before the two oil refineries started on Curacao (SHELL 1915) and Aruba (ESSO 1929) especially the men of the Dutch Windward Islands went to places like Santo Domingo to work in the cane fields or to Bermuda to work in the Dry Docks. Others moved back and forth to New York where the Sabans would mostly sail out from to the rest of the world. The men would send back their earnings to their families back home. The work in the cane fields was seasonal work and many of those who went to Santo Domingo, mostly men from St.Maarten and to a lesser extent to Cuba would return to the island after the cane cutting period was over. The oil refineries on Curacao and Aruba actively sought workers from these islands. Some 30% of the population left. After 1924 it took on such drastic proportions that the colonial government was concerned that the three islands population would be completely depleted. Seasonal immigration came to a standstill after 1924. On St. Eustatius by 1926 so many men, as well as now women also, had moved to Curacao that it had a lasting negative effect on agriculture there. Until 1932 Bermuda was still the favored destination for Sabans and to a lesser extent Statians who went to work there in the British Naval Dockyards and on the hotels which were being built there to accommodate the expanding tourist trade to that island. In April 1927 the first Sabans started moving to Curacao to work for the SHELL lake tankers (Curacaosche Scheepvaart Maatschapij). The islanders who remained here survived from the Postal economy brought about by those who went to Aruba and Curacao and sending money back to their relatives by Postal Money Order. Also by so many people moving out from the islands tradesmen from Anguilla, Nevis, St. Kitts and St. Barths started moved into the Dutch Windward Islands. Many people from the French side also went to Aruba and from the other Eastern Caribbean islands as well. I remember my uncle Captain Charles Reuben Simmons telling me that when he was Captain of the large schooner the "Mayflower" (147 feet length) in 1928 he took as many as 450 passengers with his last port being Nevis and within 48 hours was docking up in Curacao harbor. These were all people going there to look for work. On the return trip he would bring back as many as 100 workers who either did not like the place or could not find work.



Because of the decline in the working population the colonial government had to either stop collecting or abolish certain taxes such as land tax and even income tax. In 1927 there was only a birth surplus on all three islands of 60 children. Between 1920 and 1929 the population declined from 5609 to 4553.

Year	St. Maarten	Sint Eustatius	Saba	Total
1920	2.633	1.315	1.661	5.609
1929	2.180	965	1.408	4.553

The populations of the three islands, even with new incoming immigrants from the neighbouring islands, continued to decline and remain small until the early 1960's. Many of those who left from the leading families remained on Curacao and Aruba.

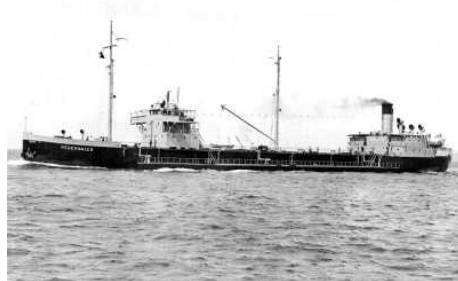
The Reverend R. Colley Hutchinson in 1951 in a booklet commemorating the establishment of Methodism in Dutch St. Maarten had the following to say: " The island families, of which the van Romondts and the Brouwers were among the most prominent, have almost entirely left or died out, and the older generation which was contemporary with them is quickly passing away. Those who would have been the natural successors are most of them living away. In their place an unceasing stream of immigrants from the neighboring islands supplies the craftsmen, manual laborers and domestic servants of today."



In 1925 an agreement for a lease of 99 years was signed with the Dutch colonial government to build a refinery on Aruba. In 1927 a crude oil transshipment terminal was in place. The actual refinery started in May of 1928 and by January 1st 1929 the first refinery units were in operation. By December 1929 the refining capacity was 100.000 barrels a day. The crude oil was brought in from Lake Maracaibo in Venezuela by small 6000 tons capacity "lake tankers" as they were called. They were of a shallow draft as the entrance to Lake Maracaibo was not very deep and the sand was constantly shifting thereby making it difficult for any large tankers to enter the lake. Besides that the political situation in Venezuela was unstable and Aruba lies right along the Venezuelan coast and because it was Dutch territory there is still a false impression that if somehow Venezuela moves to take it over that the Dutch can put up any kind of fight to defend it.

When the refinery started up the island of Aruba had a population of only between six and eight thousand inhabitants. The ESSO being an American company actively recruited English speaking workers not only from the Dutch Windward Islands but also from the rest of the English speaking Caribbean at that time all of them colonies of Great Britain. During World War II and with the increased need for gasoline and other fuel products by the British in their epic struggle with Germany the production of the refinery steadily increased. However Venezuela set a plan in motion to eventually take over and to manage their oil industry. Firstly a production agreement was signed which capped the amount of

Venezuelan crude which could be processed at the Lago oil refinery at 500.000 barrels a day. Secondly and most importantly a dredging program was started so that larger tankers could now sail through a channel directly into the lake. Also Venezuela started forcing oil companies to build large refineries on the shores of Lake Maracaibo. I have visited these refineries and they are huge.



Many of the Sabans who went to work for the Lago worked on the lake tankers. I have a story in my book from Peter Every who was torpedoed on the "Valera" on March 7th, 1944 off the coast of Barranquilla, Colombia while carrying a cargo of fuel oil from Aruba to the Panama Canal. Walter Woods from Saba was also on board of the "Valera". Peter ended up spending months in a hospital in Panama with a crushed leg. Others were not so lucky. On the night of February 16th, 1942 when the Lago refinery was attacked by U-156 under the command of Capt. Lt. Werner Hartenstein, four tankers were destroyed and seven men from Saba lost their lives. In another accident in 1944 three more Sabans lost their lives on a lake tanker. The last of the lake tankers was sold in 1954 and replaced by new large 32.000 ton tankers sailing under the Venezuelan flag and manned by Venezuelans. They were the "Esso Caripiti", the "Esso Maracaibo" and the "Esso Caracas."

I remember once coming across a letter in the office once from Lago Manager L.G. Smith to Administrator Xavier Krugers asking him to encourage Saban men to come to Aruba to work, and he said he would prefer white men. I had to admire Mr. Krugers who was answering the letter in the nineteen thirties. He told Mr. Smith that he had posted a notice, but that Mr. Smith could not expect him as Administrator of a Dutch Island with different population groups to suggest that Lago only wanted white workers from Saba. Many are the stories I heard about the Lago from friends on all three islands. In 1936 the Lago had 2810 employees of which 790 were from outside the Caribbean and were listed as the "skilled" staff. An American colony was created complete with hospital, schools, and houses and so on. The colony was completely sealed off so the "skilled" staff would not be contaminated by the local employees some of which were housed in "bachelor quarters" or in "The Village" with housing better left alone for this article. Many interesting Caribbean leaders started out in LAGO. I remember once Mr. Henry Earl Johnson telling me that Eric Gary was living in the "Bachelor quarters" in the same section with him. Someone came and called him and said that Gary had "gone off." They all ran down and there was Gary wrapped up in a sheet and with something looking like a top hat and curtseying to a broom in the corner. When asked, Gary said he was only practicing for when Her Majesty the Queen would later Knight him. And after he engineered a strike on Lago and he was deported back to Grenada he started a Labour Union was elected Prime Minister and who said that Eric was not later knighted and became "Sir Eric." His practice had paid off. The young man who overthrew Sir Eric, namely Maurice Bishop was born

on Aruba. I remember sitting on the porch of the home of Prime Minister Sir Nicholas Brathwaite, overlooking his lovely city of St. Georges and talking about his years on Curacao and Aruba, when I was visiting Grenada with Senator Kenneth van Putten and a delegation from St. Eustatius. In the British islands many houses were known as "Aruba Houses" because the owners had built them with money made on Aruba. Mr. Paul Southwell, the Prime Minister of St. Kitts/Nevis who was born on Dominica also worked for Lago and many others from the islands.



Many prominent Sabans worked for the Lago, people like Cessie Granger, Sam Wilson, Mathew Levenston, Earl Johnson, John Woods, Christian Sorton, Ernest Winfield, Arthur and Carl Anslyn, Leo Chance and so on. The only non foreigner to become a shift foreman in Lago was Mr. Leonard Hassell from Saba. Also some of our women like Joanna Martin-Johnson and others had high positions in the Lago as well. While a number of Sabans returned home, some remained on Aruba while others moved on to the United States.

From St. Maarten, people like Milton Peters, Joseph H. Lake, Sr., Alrett Peters, Alan S. Richardson, and Frank Mingo Sr. Many St. Martiners remained on Aruba and their descendants are prominent on Aruba. If you check the Aruba phone book you will see a large number of names of Windward Islanders living on Aruba.

From Statia people like Vincent Lopes, Jan Thompson, Alfred Spanner, Grifford Canword, the brothers Ruford and Gifford Duinkerck and so on. Many Statians worked on Curacao for the Shell as well. In the attack of February 16th, 1942, among those lost was James Clarence van Putten (born St. Eustatius Dec. 29th, 1913) fireman on the S/S San Nicolas, a great uncle of the Right Honourable Commissioner Clyde van Putten. Also lost from Statia that night, were John Otavan Dembrooke born Oct. 13, 1913, sailor S/S Pedernales and Hooker, William O. Born Statia January 17th, 1911, Fireman S/S Pedernales. Many of the names mentioned in this article were personal friends of mine and countless are the stories I heard from them about the Lago. Cessie Granger who is still going strong in his nineties told me that my uncle Reuben Simmons who was his neighbor had given him his suitcase to go to Aruba with. He was put to work in the Dining Hall and on his 18th birthday got drunk and made a mess. The next day the German boss took him aside forgave him and Cessie now in his nineties has never drunk or smoked from then to this day. He told me his biggest worry was if he had to come home what he was going to tell my Uncle Reuben who had given him the suitcase. Cessie told me just a few years ago that he still had the suitcase. And then my friends Alan Richardson and Frank Mingo who was always calling Alan the squawk

box as Alan used to write a column in the Lago Union newspaper. Alan regaled me with stories of his days in the army during World War II. He was instructed to shoot on sight if he was on guard and the person coming to the camp did not respond to halt. Alan said when he heard a person approaching the gate he called out halt, and on the second call to halt with no response he let go at the person. The poor donkey was the only victim of Alan's army camp duties on Aruba. I forgot to mention this when I did the eulogy for him so I am telling it now.



When the Lago closed down the refinery at the end of 1985 people in the village of San Nicolas were crying in the streets when the smoke stopped pouring from those chimneys. In 1955 when I first saw Aruba all the activity was in San Nicholas which was an English speaking town with its own peculiar accent. The accent developed out of the potpourri of accents from all over the English speaking Caribbean. The refinery had some eight thousand workers at the time and many of those still living and their children who were born on Aruba in that period in our Caribbean history hold cherished memories of those days.
