

Living off the land.

By: Will Johnson

Before the great influx of tourists to these islands our people were dependent on what they could produce from tilling the soil and fishing the seas which surround us.

During the Great Depression of the nineteen thirties the newspaper “De Slag Om Slag” described the situation as follows: “But while the Windward Islands whiled away the years in tranquility and quiet, great economic changes were taking place in the State and surrounding lands. Gradually St. Martin lost markets for the salt; the markets for agricultural products of the islands were lost; Saba ‘Spanish work’ lost its market; unemployed returned, not to build houses or buy a piece of land anymore, but because it was going bad abroad; depression reached the islands; unemployment and poverty threatened, and if presently our currency is devaluated, then the Windward Islands shall have to pay terribly because the population did not turn to look out for other possibilities during prosperity.

“It is amazing how much the present administration is doing for these islands. There is even an Agricultural Department. New cultures are being tried in Saba and St. Eustatius. There are modern organized botanical gardens. Cattle-breeding is encouraged by bonuses and free freight. Loans free of interest are given to the Agricultural Association. I do not believe, however, that the inhabitants of these islands will have much benefit from this institution, if a change in the tendency of the inhabitants does not take place, whereby they will be able to understand the ideas which are prominent at these institutions and measures, and work them out to their own interest.”

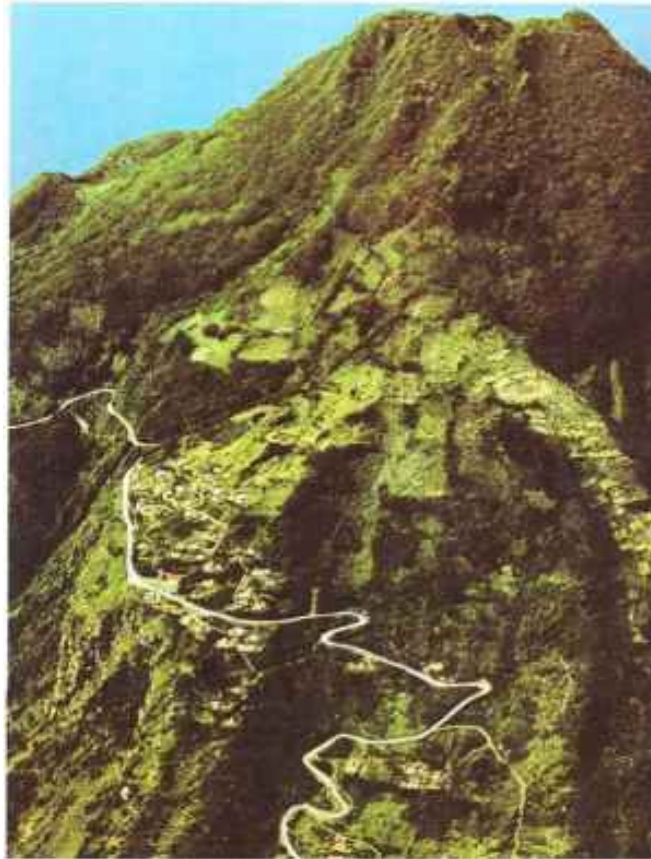
In the “Slag Om Slag” # 87 of 1936, under the headline Agricultural Association, we read the following; “On Saturday afternoon, 10th inst., a meeting of this association was held in the Oranje School at Philipsburg. There were 23 persons present. Two new members were proposed and accepted, namely Messrs. A.R. Brouwer and Richard Richardson. The Secretary requested those members who were in arrears to pay up their contributions. Mr. L.A. van Romondt proposed to

hold the meetings of the Association at 9 o'clock in the morning but the proposal was voted down. Mr. Hyman then gave a lecture on Onion growing which was very interesting and which was followed with much interest by those present."



Mr. C.A.S. Hyman, from Barbados, was the agriculturist and he and Editor Brouwer were soon at war. In another edition of the "Slag Om Slag" of 1936 # 87 Brouwer reports on a meeting with the Governor;" Means and ways, whereby permanent work for the inhabitants could be brought about were discussed. If salt could not be exploited, then the delegation proposed that the Government loan the Arrowroot Company a certain amount, which would help the company to erect a factory and cistern. After a long discussion it was decided to pay a visit to D.C. van Romondt Esq. and obtain from him information on the Arrowroot business. Although Mr. van Romondt is also one who joins the general opinion that Mr. Hyman is against the growing of Arrowroot in this island, it was decided

to consult both Messrs. Hyman (Agriculturist) and da Costa (Assistant Agriculturist) and obtain their opinions with regard to the possibility of producing a marketable arrowroot starch in this island. Of course we know that refined arrowroot starch can be produced here for samples have been sent away and the reports received were very favourable.”



In the Magazine “Tropical Agriculture” the official journal of the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in Trinidad Vo. XVIII No. 7 July 1941, Mr. C.A.S. Hyman, wrote an interesting article on Agriculture in the Dutch Windward Islands. Also Dr. H.A. Ballou in a report in February 1934, to his Excellency the Governor of Curacao wrote an extensive report on Tropical Agriculture in the Dutch Windward Islands which report was published in aforementioned magazine Vol. XI, No. 12, December 1934. I have copies of both reports. Hyman writes in his article: “A good market, which has not yet been fully taken advantage of, exists in the Leeward group for many commodities that can be produced in St. Maarten, Saba and St. Eustatius. Since 1933 the Government has granted free freight to certain

cattle shipped from the Windward to the Leeward group and recently this free freight has been extended to all agricultural produce shipped through the recognized agricultural societies. One such society exists in each of the three islands.

Many conflicting opinions as to the agricultural possibilities of these islands have been expressed to lay visitors and officials. In many cases these views have been either too optimistic or too pessimistic depending on whether their visits coincided with the rainy or dry season. In contrast, Ballou wrote in 1934 "With reference to promoting the prosperity of the Dutch Windward Islands by means of agriculture, I must say that I see very little hope of any considerable degree of prosperity being brought again to these islands in the near future. It should, however, be possible to improve on existing conditions very considerably. If the conditions of living are to be improved at all it appears certain the improvement must be brought about by attention to agriculture as there seems to be no other line of industry likely to be developed in these small islands."

Following recommendations made by Ballou in a report to the Curacao government, after his visit to these islands in 1934, a Government agriculturist was appointed to the three islands in 1935. In September of that year an Experiment Station was established at headquarters, St. Maarten. In 1937 a similar Station commenced work in St. Eustatius. This was abandoned and re-established on a new site in 1939. In 1938 work was started on a small station in Saba. Prior to the appointment of Government agricultural officers, agricultural and cattle-raising associations were set up, in each of the three islands."

To give some statistics on what was produced we again quote from "De Slag Om Slag" N. 157 of February 12th, 1938. Export from St. Eustatius to Curacao:

	1935	1936
Yams	21.400kg	23.563. kg
Sweet potatoes	172.500"	511.076 "
Dutch potatoes	30.224 "	41. 641 "

Cattle	107	123
Sheep	189	447
Hogs	11	29

In 1929 the paper states that 12.000 sacks of 70 kilos each (total 840.000kg) of sweet potatoes and yams were shipped to Curacao alone. Were we to go back to the times when the whaling schooners called at St. Eustatius for their yam supply, we are pretty sure the amount which was shipped during those years would be 4 times as much as 1937. This would be the case with potatoes also.”



On Saba in 1940 over 500 barrels of Irish potatoes were exported. Former Minister Leo Chance told me that his father Mr. Bertin Chance imported biscuits in barrels from Barbados. These same barrels he would use to ship the potatoes to a Mr. Sadeek in Curacao a Lebanese trader there. On July 13th, 1940 at least 150 barrels were made available for shipping by the following persons: George Johnson 18, Cohone Johnson 6, Jim Johnson 12, Winifred Hassell 24, Peter Zagers 12, Lorenzo Hassell 9, Nolaska Hassell 12, Thomas Hassell 12, Norman Hassell 9, Herman Johnson 6, Richard Johnson 6, William H. Johnson 9, George Hassell 9, Daniel Hassell 6. The only one still alive from this group is Mr. Norman Hassell.

It is also interesting to read the statistics on livestock in these islands formerly. These are only estimates as many cattle raisers in fear of having to pay taxes gave

a much smaller number than was the actual case. However the figures are still impressive when compared to nowadays:

	Years:	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928
Cattle:	St. Martin	854	951	927	1051	855	954	763
	St. Eustatius	547	647	642	693	690	702	652
	Saba	208	200	164	156	152	170	156
Pigs:	St. Martin	240	188	152	331	298	284	217
	St. Eustatius	292	291	314	267	303	370	294
	Saba	295	275	246	301	279	255	143

I will forego giving the statistics on goats and sheep but they too were in their hundreds on each of the islands.

In the books by Dr. Julia Crane “Saba Silhouettes” and “Statia Silhouettes” there are wonderful stories of survival from the land by many of the old timers from both islands. Those books should be used in our schools on these two islands so that the children will be able to communicate with their ancestors and learn a lesson in living from the past.

Sadly there is very little to remind us today that these islands had an agricultural past. That which projects itself as agriculture today would not be able to feed a family for a week. The few people though who plant around their houses continue to demonstrate that it is possible to grow your own food on these islands. One avid gardener here on Saba, Mr. Franklin Every often tells me that his uncle Walter Granger always advised him that “planting will not get you rich but it will put something on the table”.

It is true that our people have been able for the past fifty years to make a decent living from sources other than tilling the soil. But that has increased our dependency on imported food all the more. On a visit to Madeira and several of the Canary Islands I was able to see banana plants around every house. In the

poor man's yard as well as the rich man's yard, you see bananas everywhere. Madeira is a big exporter of bananas to Europe while at the same time it has been experiencing a robust tourism economy for more than one hundred years.

When I was a boy growing up nearly every household had a cow in the yard, producing offspring, milk and manure for the extensive fields of potatoes and other produce in the hills all around the island. I doubt if there are fifteen head of cattle on Saba today. On St. Maarten there were cattle everywhere on plantations owned by friends of mine. I feel that we on Saba could be independent once we realize how our forefathers survived here in greater numbers in former times. Of course in order to survive as an independent people you would have to either "fish or cut bait." In order to be independent we must be able to feed ourselves as much as possible. The only way to do that is to return to the soil. If not completely, then at least as a hobbyist like me and you will see that you will be able to "put something on the table".

Amen.