

EDDY BUNCAMPER

BY: Will Johnson

My relationship with the Buncamper family includes being a blood relation of the young members of the family via their grandmother Ms. Olga Buncamper-Hassell. All Sabans in one way or the other are related but I am certain that she and my father were family.

When I first started living on St. Maarten in 1960 I used to often visit the family in that stately old van Romondt mansion where "Old Street" is now located. Mr. Walter Buncamper who had been Acting Lt. Governor of the Windward Islands had been recently replaced by Lt. Governor Jan Jacob Beaujon. Mr. Buncamper was retired by then and had an office in his house where he would help people with legal advice. His mother-in-law "Maria" lived with the family. And just as you cannot transplant an old tree, Maria always looked forward to my visits so that she could hear some news about Saba. She lived to be nearly one hundred years old. She was always making up packages to send to Mrs. Margarite Hassell, as she thought that Saba was just as bad off as when she had moved to St. Maarten. One day when I went to the house to go out with her grandson Winston, I heard him calling out to her to find out if she had sent a package to Saba. Yes she had and had packed one of Winston's white boots in the box. After a flood of bad words better left unwritten I convinced Winston to call his brother Anthony at Winair to stop the box which he did. So we headed to the airport and Winston with one white boot on was able to reunite the boot with the lost brother headed to Saba. After that Maria's boxes to Saba were subjected to more controls than modern customs officers looking for drugs are able to do.

I also liked to visit the Buncamper home in the hope that Mr. Buncamper would offer me a glass of the bottle of fine whiskey he would at times have on the table. And indeed I would be lucky sometimes. He was quite a talker and liked to reminisce on his career with the Courts and as Administrator of Saba and later as Act. Lt. Governor, of the Windward Islands. Those were the days of a quiet St. Martin where the few leading families all knew each other and entertained socially. I also remember attending some nice birthday parties at that once lovely home on the Front Street.

One day on my usual visit I found Mr. Buncamper sitting alone in the dining room looking very sad and depressed. The house was an enormous two storied building and the rooms were all large. Downstairs had just been rented by the firms of Spritzer & Fuhrmann, a jewelry store, and El Globo a camera store. I thought I should leave him alone, but he asked me to stay. He told me that he was so upset because his son Eddie, the one he had the most hope for had just told him he was leaving school to become a "servant" for the Wathey family at the new pier at Pointe Blanche. Eddie had his father's height and had taken his colour from his mother. A tall blond, blue eyed young man, one could not imagine that his grandfather was a short black man. But so it goes in the Caribbean. Recently on a visit to St. Vincent for an OECS meeting my son Chris and I were having lunch with the Minister of Tourism from Grenada. A white native girl was serving us. I told the Minister that in the hills above Kingstown a group of poor whites had settled there from Barbados in the 1800's. As a matter of fact a short white man was my taxi

driver there and he told me that he was Robert Gibson a relative of The Honourable Richard Gibson of St. Maarten whose mother was one of those white Gibson's from St. Vincent.



Anyway the Minister from Grenada told me that with his brown colour that he looked at everyone as family and remarked; “look what happened to Sir Grantley Adams. When Barbados has a ceremony honouring their black national hero only blond white people can come to the ceremony. Sir Grantley fought the white plantation owners to gain political control of Barbados. He married a daughter of a well-known white plantation owner. His only son Tom (also later on Prime Minister) married a woman from England and so the only descendants of Sir Grantley are white Caribbean people.

I listened to Mr. Buncamper and at times he was close to tears, and I tried to give him comfort that perhaps Eddy would change his mind and go back to school. Eddy was just thirteen going on fourteen at the time. I tried to talk to him but he loved working on the new pier. By the time he was sixteen or seventeen he had taken away a large number of shipping agencies from the Wathey family and was on his way to becoming a millionaire by the age of eighteen. He told me once that he had borrowed ten thousand guilders from his father to start his business and that his father was so concerned about the money that he made a special effort to pay back that loan in record time. I once read in a book called “The Rich and the Super Rich”, that nine out of ten of them had dropped out from high school. I was recently telling someone that I cannot remember seeing Eddie reading even a newspaper. Yet when you

were in his company those who did not know would think that he was a graduate of the Harvard School of Economics. He was a person who attracted friends. Whatever spare time he had was dedicated to having a good time and accommodating the fairer sex, in their numbers I might add. When one travelled with Eddie for a week upon return one had to go to confession for two weeks. And it was to be hoped that the priest was not a tattletale and pass on your stories to a larger audience like the Rabbi did to George and Elaine in "Seinfeld."

Eddie, Max Pandt then Lt. Governor of the Windward Islands, Dr. William "Billy" Herbert the opposition leader of St. Kitts-Nevis and me at the time were good friends and were often together. Another good friend of both Eddie and I was the late Mr. Lassel Rouse of St. Eustatius who represented Eddie with agencies of ships over there calling at the oil terminal. Eddie also kept old family friends around him. The Philips family on Upper Front Street where I lived had a long relationship going back over a century with the Buncampers and Eddie had Harold Philips as his boat captain and doing all kinds of odd jobs including that of body guard. Eddie was a prince among men.



I remember one day, a very calm day, Eddie, Bobby Velasquez and I went to Saba on a 12 ft. dingy and returned in the afternoon with one extra passenger a large land turtle which someone had given to Bobby. We ran out of gasoline just outside the harbor and the "Yankee Clipper" passing by gave us a tow into the harbor. We used to visit, fish, and party on all the small islands surrounding St. Maarten, Anguilla and St. Barths. Eddie use to call me "Doc." Lulu Deher had mistakenly shot me once with a gun used for hunting sharks with. I am still grateful to him. He slammed it against a cistern and I got the secondary blast. He had first intended to slam it against my body. We did not know it was loaded with a

16 gauge cartridge. Anyway I doctored myself with about 600 band aids until the police came and I had to go to the hospital. Even Dr. Levendag thought I had done a good job. From then on Eddy, Lulu and the other boys started calling me "Doc." I remember once going with him on a Sunday to spend the day on Anguilla on his large World War II mine sweeper converted into a yacht. Sitting there, with Uncle Carl telling stories about all the old families of St. Eustatius and the Eastern Caribbean islands, is a memory to be carried through life. The stories which he told me served me well when I was doing research for my book "For the Love of St. Martin". Uncle Carl was the most informed person I knew on matters like who was related to whom and so on. His wife Anastacia was from St. Barths and he died on a cruise ship and is buried on his beloved St. Eustatius. I recently wrote a manuscript on the Buncamper family which I have not sought a publisher for as yet. The book deals with a Journal kept by Mr. Albert Buncamper for the year 1927. Since he was the salt checker and was involved in farming and so on I used the journal as the centerpiece of life on St. Maarten for the year 1927 and have illustrated it with photos from that period and of the various family members. I need to find a publisher. But I need to do a lot of things, however when I fold up one base tent I move on to a new challenge and a new camping place.

When I got a call from Minister Leo Chance at 6 AM on the morning of December 31st, 1990 informing me that there was a rumor that Eddy had died at the age of 41, I just could not believe it. I had seen him some days before and he looked fine, though he did tell me that the doctor had suggested he change his exercise program. Use your imagination to find out what Eddie would have considered as his main program of exercise. We had a good laugh about how differently the doctor looked at exercise than men about town.

The family asked me to do the eulogy. To give an idea as to whom he was, here are some of the people officiating at the large ceremony on Front Street in the Roman Catholic Church. Doing the readings was Senator Millicent de Weever, Mr. Julian Conner, and the homily was done by Father Simon Wilson. Tributes were paid by former Lt. Governor Ralph Richardson and at the gravesite former Lt. Governor Theodore M. Pandt also paid tribute, as well as people like Mr. Phil Laplace of Tropical Shipping and Ms. Linda Lake of St. Maarten Port services

The Chronicle of Thursday, January 3rd, 1991 did an obituary on his life from which I now quote a small part and after that the eulogy which I made on behalf of the family in the church.

"Eddy Buncamper's love for the island's harbor was matched by a great talent to surround himself with the right kind of people able to execute the ideas he harboured. This not only freed him from the necessary P.R. Work, but also allowed him to spend time helping out Saba with the stone crushing undertaking and start planning a container Trans shipment terminal for St. Eustatius. Possibly the greatest compliment is that Edward F. Buncamper leaves behind a well-oiled organization, which although he will be sorely missed, can continue to perform as it did when he was still alive. This, it should be observed, is a rare achievement pointing at true greatness.

"Once honoured by the local Rotary Club with a Paul Harris Fellowship, Eddy was a man who evoked friendship wherever he went. He never assumed the role of a successful businessman, but always

remained himself. If he did St. Maarten proud, the island today should be greatly proud of him.

EULOGY.

“Edward Francis Buncamper was born on Saint Maarten on April 12th, 1949. He was the son of former Lt. Governor of the Windward Islands the late Walter Granville Buncamper of Saint Maarten and the late Olga Elena Hassell of Saba.

At an age when most young people are agonizing about the uncertainties of high school, Edward decided to forego all of that and to take a short cut to success. At the age of fifteen he was already working as a Jack-of-all-trades on the A.C.Wathey pier at Pointe Blanche. Because of this he came in contact with the owners of various shipping companies.

By the time that most young people are trying to make up their mind as to which College they should attend, Edward had started his own business and was well on his way to becoming one of St. Maarten’s most successful entrepreneurs. He had not passed on life’s highway the stone that marks the highest point, but, being weary for a moment, he lay down by the wayside, and, using his burden for a pillow, fell into a dreamless sleep that kisses down his eyelids still. While yet in love with life and raptured with the world he passed to silence by his untimely death.

He was a giant among men. A man of great enterprise and vision. Where others saw failure, he saw opportunity. He was always planning and getting involved in new business ventures, and was active in various businesses on all three Dutch Windward Islands. Although he never ran for political office, he was considered by all who knew him to be a true politician. Whenever you saw Eddie in a group there were always one or two politicians in tow. He loved the intrigue of the political world and obviously savoured the intricacies which are part of political life. He appreciated the ribald irreverence and the street defiance of the high and mighty, which are the backbone of West Indian politics. Even when he did not see eye to eye with an adversary he dealt with them in a spirit of joviality and with no animosity whatsoever. When anger was necessary he expressed it in a theatrical more than in an angry way.

In a world where true friendship and compassion seem to have been lost, Eddie proved to be both compassionate and a true friend. His wealth was displayed in the season of beneficence and not in the vanity of discourse. Neither his success as a businessman, nor his political influence ever went to his head. His employees of many years, as well as his friends can attest to the fact that he was EDDY and just that. No Mr. Buncamper, No “Boss man” or any such title.

And so we are here today, family, friends, and the community at large, including those from the neighbouring islands to say a final farewell to this great son of the Windward Islands.

We share in the sorrow of the entire Buncamper family. While for them few comforting words can be found at this time, I would like to quote from an oration by Robert Green Ingersoll at his brother’s grave;

“ The loved and loving brother, husband, father, friend died where manhood’s morning almost touches noon, and while the shadows still were falling toward the West. This brave and tender man in every storm of life was OAK and ROCK, but in the sunshine was VINE and FLOWER. He climbed the

heights and left all superstitions far below, while on his forehead fell the golden dawning of a grander day. He sided with the weak and with a willing hand gave alms; He added to the sum of human joy; and were every one to whom he did some loving service to bring a blossom to his grave, he would sleep tonight beneath a wilderness of flowers.”

And as for myself, I have not attempted to excite your emotions, I am trying to repress my own; Instead of the language of a public speaker, you will hear only the lamentations of a wailing friend.

MAY HE REST IN PEACE.