

The Bush Lawyer

By: Will Johnson

I started to work in the old Courthouse in Philipsburg on October 10th. 1960. I worked in the Post office, but also did work for the Receivers Office, the Curacao Bank, and the Notary and even assisted the Court when needed. As I was fluent in both Dutch and Papiamento and had a smattering of French and Spanish as well this was considered an asset to those who paid me fls. 192.50 Per month. Among the small staff was Miss Laurel Peterson a lifelong friend who is married to Cor Eybrechts and has lived these many years on Curacao.

The St. Maarten community was quite small back then, and so by the time Christmas rolled around, I got to know everyone on the island, and had renewed acquaintances with those I had met on my yearly trips back and forth to Curacao starting in 1955.

One of the important people, at the time, undoubtedly was Laurel's father Mr. Wallace Bradford Peterson. He was born on September 3rd, 1912 and died March 20th, 1981. On August 22nd, 1934 he married Margaret Sophia Peterson born October 30th, 1916 and together they had six children. His parents were Daniel Alfred Peterson (born August 25th, 1875 and died December 5th, 1968) and Ann Elizabeth Albertha Vlaun (born October 31st 1878 and died June 26th, 1954). My paternal great grandmother was Sarah Elizabeth Vlaun. The Vlaun's are all descended from one Jean Valaen who lived on St. Eustatius already in 1680. Descended from the so-called "Courlanders", mercenary soldiers brought out from Latvia and Estonia by the Dutch West India Company. The bastion of the Peterson family was Simpson bay of course, though Wallace used to tell me that there was an Anguilla connection as well. Simpson bay was cut off from the rest of Dutch St. Martin in the great hurricane of 1819 for over one hundred years and it was easier to trade with Marigot by boat. And so, many of the leading families in Marigot were connected with families from Simpson bay as well.

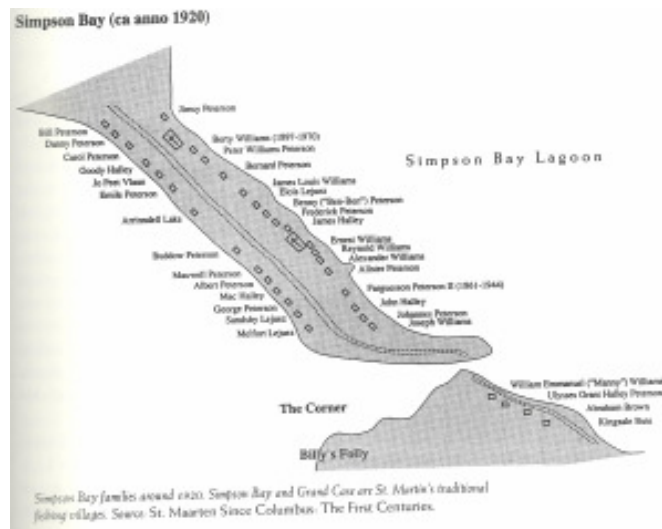


Wallace had served as a member of the police force and had been a detective. He had gone to work on Aruba in 1939, then to Curacao in 1945 and on August 17th, 1956 returned to St. Maarten. Having served as a detective on the police force brought with it an aura of distinction, and the detective part brought with it a great deal of respect. A people who did not know the workings of the law would stay well clear of a detective, even a retired one, for fear that for any silly reason "he might lock me to hell up." Better safe than sorry. And so Wallace after his retirement stuck with the legal profession and became known to all as the "bush-lawyer". Those whom he opposed meant it in a derogatory way to imply that he knew nothing of the law. However by the time he passed away many lawyers with diploma's and big law firms

were singing his praises and wondering how he had won certain cases. He was eulogized at his funeral as a “raconteur par excellence” by Richard Gibson, a leading St. Martin attorney. Twelve years later, another lawyer, Roland Duncan, recalled how Peterson confounded visiting Dutch Judges and lawyers in the courtroom with his knowledge of the law, though he had no formal training or degrees in jurisprudence. Gibson at his funeral stated:” Pete’s linguistic ability was put to excellent use during the past 20 years in exercising his profession as a “legal practitioner.’ His years in exercising his services were virtually rendered Pro Deo for humanitarian reasons. The unfortunate could always count on Pete to champion its cause. Pete was known by his colleagues as the ‘walking encyclopedia.’ Call a name of a person on St. Maarten, and Pete would be able to recite that person’s whole family tree. Ask Pete about a piece of land, and Pete could give you, ‘stante pede’, a complete history of that land, going back to its original owner. Indeed, he was a Census Office and a Cadastre Office all in one.”

Mr. Leo Chance told me recently that he stuck the label on him at a political rally on the square in Philipsburg. However already at a young age Wallace was defending cases before the Court. In the newspaper “De Slag-om-Slag” in its edition of April 17th, 1937 which mentions several cases brought before the Court, we read the following: “Mr. G. Katsaras spouse of Marie E.Vlaun, Mr. L.A. O’Connor spouse of Lolita W. Vlaun and Mr. C.V. Vlaun are suing Mr. J. Vlaun for fls.950.—being for 3/7ths of rents collected from a property which Mr. Vlaun bought from the mother of the plaintiffs 15 years ago. Mr. Wallace B. Peterson, mandatory for the plaintiffs; Mr. A.R. Brouwer mandatory for the defendant.”

Back then already in the column “Sambo and Buddy Jep” the phrase “bush lawyer” was being used for anyone who was defending cases before the COURTS as a legal practitioner and even as early as Mr. Josiah Charles Waymouth’s time when he defended cases for people.



At the time Wallace lived in Cole Bay and was an all rounder. In an advertisement in the same newspaper in 1936 we read: “Fresh Beef and Mutton. Saturdays and Tuesdays, respectively. Young

animals butchered. Delivered at any address in town. Cheaper than anywhere else. Order your meat from; Wallace B. Peterson, Cole Bay.”

I knew Wallace from the political world of course. In 1963 Wallace took on the task of opposing Claude Wathey in the Island Council elections and in 1966 in the Federal elections, and then in 1979 after putting down his sword he ran on the same list with Claude for the Island Council elections. From an early age Wallace was interested in politics. He used to contribute articles to “Broertje” Brouwer’s newspaper “De Slag om Slag”. In this newspaper of October 17th, 1936 No. 87 we read the following:”

During the meeting of the Court of Policy held on Monday 5h inst., His Honour the Gezaghebber (J.D.Meiners) said that the St. Martin people did not give him the impression of being in need. The people, it appears, of whom there were between 50 and 60 present in the Court-hall, immediately decided to give a demonstration and prove to His Honour their poverty. On Friday 9th instant, both Local Councillors were asked by Mr. Wallace B. Peterson, who undertook to conduct the demonstration, to join the people and act as spokesmen for them.” The demonstration took place on Monday October 12th, 1936 starting at the bridge by the Long wall and the 150 people present marched silently around the town.

I have a notice from the “Slag om Slag” which reads as follows: “The undersigned hereby wishes to sincerely thank all those who voted for him at the last election for Local Councilor. Also all those who sent Bouquets and congratulations, and especially Messrs. Wallace B. Peterson and Andries Vlaun who stuck to him so devotedly through the whole campaign. St. Martin N.P. July 22nd, 1936. A.R. Brouwer.”



The other newspaper was “De Bovenwindse Stemmen”, edited by Mr. W. Netherwood. These two papers were constantly at each others throats. Many times Wallace would recite from memory a poem which he had written in the “Slag-om-Slag”. When Mr. Netherwoods first wife (a van Romondt) died, he married a young lady, daughter of the well-known Methodist Minister Charles McIntosh Darrell. The poem was a ribald commentary, done in West Indian calypso style questioning Mr. Netherwoods ability to consummate the marriage. And believe me if Mr. Netherwood had any doubts, and if he read that poem before the honeymoon, it would have put him in such a frame of mind as to further weaken his

ability to consummate the marriage. But then who knows. Back then everything eaten was fresh from the land or the sea. And so you wonder if Wallace's poem had the intended effect.

In the "Slag-om-Slag" there was a column entitled "Sambo and Buddy Jep," to which Wallace also contributed his share. Later when Mr. Joseph H. Lake Sr. started the Windward Islands Opinion (July 1st, 1959) a column was started under the title "Wally and Joe." You need not guess who the "Wally" was. When I had my own newspaper I resisted the temptation to have such a column. There was no need for it. Four of the five "Letters to the Editor", from "a concerned citizen", "an angry voter" etc. would take care of the need to teach an opponent a lesson.

I learned many lessons from Wallace including who fathered whom. And so I too got to know of many of the skeletons in people's closets thanks to Wallace. Politics on St. Maarten were rough back then. Lots of name calling at public rallies. Wallace could hold his own when it came time for him to defend himself.

Once I recall an incident which took place in which I was supposedly a key witness. I was at the Little Bay Hotel. It must have been around 1966 or so. My boss Fons O'Connor was in his cups and in the casino. I was trying to avoid him. Just like the general public was of the opinion that Wallace once having been a detective could at his discretion "lock you to hell up," for me too a boss in his cups formed an imminent and present danger so that I might end up without a job. And so I tried to avoid my boss. But it was not to be. Wallace was out on the town that night. He was not a drinker as far as I can recall. Anyway an exchange of words took place, a scuffle broke out and a few blows were passed. Not the Mohammed Ali – George Foreman type of blows. No. No. It was just a few pushes and shoves that was all. The casino people quickly intervened and I thought that was the end of the story.

A couple of days later a Dutch police officer came to fetch me at Captain Hodge's Guesthouse with a long "proces- verbal" in which document I was the key witness to an incident whereby "lawyer" Peterson had mishandled the "local Judge", the latter believe it or not was one of the many functions assigned to my boss Fons. The police officer a friend of the established order informed me that at long last they had enough evidence to put the bush lawyer behind bars where he belonged and to disqualify him as a lawyer. I said to the Police Officer "And you expect me to sign that?" "Of course," he said. And he went on to inform me as to what risks I ran as the established order was depending on me to get the case started. Of course I did not sign it and told him in front of witnesses what use he could put that paper to and if he wanted to lock me up for not signing he could take me to jail right away rather than wait.

Word got around and that evening I found myself in a hornet's nest at the bar of Sea View Hotel. Nel Bergland, a friend, and considered as Claude's bodyguard came to my rescue by telling the angry crowd that they could curse me all they wanted, but if they laid a hand on me that they would have him to deal with, and that kept the belligerents at bay, but scarcely so.

I don't know if the case of the judge versus the lawyer made it to the bar. But it was without my signature and Wallace appreciated that. Fons was relieved as he got caught up in a political current pushed by others and I don't think he ever wanted the matter to go to Court.

And believe it or not when I ran for office on Saba in 1971, I was officially still a civil servant on St. Maarten but registered as a voter on Saba. Wallace was sent to Saba by the Democrat Party to make a case to have me removed from the voters list. "No hard feelings, Will", he said, "but I have a job to do." Luckily for me there was an Old Dutch lawyer who I had brought in to defend a case for a young lady, so I engaged him there and then to defend me. Anyway the Judge ruled that I could take part in the election.

Wallace and I remained friends nevertheless and he still would tell me who fathered who. Wallace was honoured later in life by having a street in Ebenezer named after him. During his years of appearing before the court, Peterson was the "zaakwaarnemer" for four hundred and fifty nine cases. His first and last court appearances involved rent issues. In his eulogy attorney Richard Gibson concluded with the following statement "On Friday, March 20th, 1981, the Court, under case Nr. 5, had scheduled Marianna Peterson, represented by Wallace Bradford Peterson, against the Rent Commission. Pete appeared and pleaded his case as he had done so often in the past. In the evening, at home with his wife and family, Pete rehearsed, as he so loved to do, the fine points of that case against the Rent Commission. Immediately thereafter, Pete was no more. He had pleaded and rehearsed his last earthly case."

He was good friends with the poet Charles Borromeo Hodge Jr. who had high praise for the times he spent with Wallace discussing events of the day. I have a fourteen page letter written to me by Borromeo from New York in which he comments on his friends on St. Maarten including Wallace. And I am certain that Wallace, "Broertje" Brouwer and Wilhelm Netherwood are still slugging it out beyond those pearly gates while I am here on earth still trying to find that poem which Wallace wrote back in the nineteen thirties.

May their work here on earth be remembered and placed in the context of the time in which they lived.
