

Two Tales of One Hassell Family

By: Will Johnson

Sometime back Ms. Lynn Costenaro of Sea Saba called me and said that she had two interesting stories for me. They had been sent to her by a Mr. Brian Mark of Mar Vista, California. He must have found her website on the internet and sent the following letter: To whom it concerns. "I was a friend of Richard Hassell (who passed away some years ago) and I heard many of his stories about growing up on Saba. I encouraged him to write about Saba and the stories he knew, and before he passed he was able to write two pieces. I've included them here, as I think they may interest Saban Islanders, as well as visitors interested in your island."

As there were so many Richard Hassell's on Saba it was not easy to figure out his background. One of the stories which he wrote was about his grandfather Capt. Richard Hassell. I contacted several "old timers", but it was teacher Frank Hassell who helped me to put the puzzle together. His grandfather was also Richard Hassell married to Ann Rebecca Hassell. They owned the house in Windwardside which belonged to the R.C. nuns and which was torn down to build the Kindergarten there. His aunt Lilly May was the organist in the Anglican Church both in Windwardside and The Bottom. The family bought a home at The Gap which they sold later on to Mr. Ignatius Zagers. He had a sister named Carrie who spent her last years on St. Maarten and who has a surviving daughter Leonora Hassell who is in the "Sweet Repose" at the St. John's Ranch. I put that name to it as my fond memories go back to the "Sweet Repose" on the Backstreet. These folks are related to Captain Eddie Hassell of the "Swinging Doors" restaurant in the Windwardside.

I will first give the story of Richard Hassell (Dick) the friend of Mr. Brian Mark (and we also thank Ms. Lynn of Sea Saba) whom we thank for bringing these stories to our attention so that we can share them with a larger audience to once again show how people from this little island moved around in former times.

He starts his own story with a Foreword.

"The story entitled "The Saga of Captain Richard Hassell", has been written by me his (Grandson) Richard S. Hassell, mainly because of it's being unique by nature of it's contents and is somewhat abrupt in some circumstances, but is nevertheless a true story as told to me by my mother and she in turn was told by her mother, which is really considered to be a part of my family's history."

"Since I am the grandson of Captain Richard Hassell I am now compelled to write something about my own life with a view that it will be construed as a story of some interest to anyone who may read it.

Like all my forbears I too, was born on Saba even though my brother who was the eldest of three children was born in Providence Rhode Island and lived there until he was two years of age when my mother took him back to Saba to see the family, planning to come back to Providence in the near future, but she never did return and chose to live in Saba where the weather was like summer year round. In the meantime my father kept on going to sea and would come home for a vacation every two years or

so, but worked doing painting or other needed repairs on our home if required, and would even put in a vegetable garden if the weather was good.

“According to the records that were located in the archives in Holland, there were 3 families of Hassells that were found to be residing on Saba and who had settled therein 1640 and in 1695 one of them was listed as a Richard Hassell and so the name Richard has come down through the ages from family to family all having the name Richard in each family till my Grandfather who had 4 children, 2 girls and 2 boys, had the notion that he too should name one of his sons Richard who also went to sea, and was a Naval Officer in World War 1, but finally became a landlubber after getting married to a girl in Providence, and my mother in turn named me Richard. In 1695 there were only around 500 people living on Saba and so that is the reason practically everyone had to go to sea in order to earn a livelihood, while all the women were home makers.

I was born on December 13th 1913 on Saba and enjoyed a very happy and peaceful life there until I was 21 years of age. Since there were no cars there everyone had to walk wherever they went because the only mode of transportation were horses which numbered about 6 or so and were owned by the Doctor, the Governor and the others by merchants on the island. We had no movies or telephones or any ice cream stores, but I would not change one day of it. Now that our little island boasts over 100 cars and 2 movie houses, everyone now possesses flush toilets and showers, T.V. sets and Telephones including supermarkets with ice cream available. However I would not change life as it was while growing up there, and I will always cherish the memories of my childhood.

I had a loving kind and gentle mother who was the epitome of a first class lady who never smoked or drank alcoholic beverages of any kind and the word “damn” was not in her vocabulary. My father was also a good man who never cursed or used profane or foul language of any kind but he did like his little schnapps now and again to which my mother found it hard to accept the idea that he did, but he never overdid it.

He came home on vacation December 1920 and upon returning to the United States brought my brother with him and found my brother a job with a manufacturing concern in Brooklyn New York. He then went back to sea, sailing around the East Coast of Canada and the United States. In November 1922 he came down with chronic bronchitis and asthma and his doctor in Providence, Rhode Island suggested that he should retire back to Saba where the tropical weather would at least give him better health there. So he made up his mind that he would do just that and came back to Brooklyn, New York to make sure that my brother was doing O.K. and being satisfied that he was took passage on a steamboat that sailed between New York and the Caribbean, with St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands being the first stop. While on the way he came down with double pneumonia and bronchitis and when the ship reached St. Thomas he had to be placed in the hospital there and passed away a couple of days later. This was a great sorrow and shock for the family but my mother was a very religious person and although suffering great sorrow, she nevertheless accepted my father’s death as God’s will. She was highly concerned about how well we would be able to live and fortunately found a job as a school teacher in one of the schools where we lived and along with dress making jobs we were able to live fairly comfortably.

I was only 9 years of age when my father passed away and found it hard to cope with, but my mother would sit me down and tell me that this was God's will and that we had to accept it as such. As time went on I finally reached age 17 when I graduated from the local school that I attended with the equivalent of a High School education in the United States. On many occasions I would talk to my mother about coming to the United States after I graduated, but soon thereafter, the great depression came about and that scuttled everything that my mother and I had planned. As luck would have it I found out that the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey had built an oil refinery on the Dutch island of Aruba and that the possibility existed that I might find a job there. So I talked it over with my mother and she agreed that it was worth a try and so off I went to Aruba and as luck would have it I was hired as an apprentice in the electrical department. However electricity at the time was all Greek to me and it was suggested by the electrician with whom I worked, that I should take a course in electricity from the International Correspondence Schools in the United States, and so I did and after 4 years with on the job training and the course in electricity the company promoted me to a first class electrician. This was the terminology used by the company, but I can assure you that it did not hurt my feelings any, because it was not a fallacy. During my four years tenure I had switched to the electrical shop, where I worked on repairing electrical motors and also rebuilding them. After spending 10 years in Aruba I wanted to come to the United States, and so I did in May 1944 but I had to be released from the oil company because they were considered to be a highly essential industry who was supplying two thirds of all the aviation gas for the allies in England and North Africa and because of that 7 oil tankers were torpedoed by German while waiting to be docked and loaded with aviation gas. It occurred in 1943 and the refinery had been in a state of total blackout, but some of the submarines had surfaced and was shelling the refinery and in doing so were first firing tracer bullets of all colors and some of them were going over my head and hitting the bachelor quarters where I lived. Some passed only 10 feet over my head where I was standing watching the whole scenario and as in the rest of the health turmoil of mine the Good Lord was with me. We were shelled twice more after that but luckily I was a mile or so from where the shells hit. After arriving in the United States in May 1944 I went immediately to the draft board in Brooklyn, New York and at that time they were not accepting anyone over age 30 and they suggested that I go to the Naval supply depot and they would employ me as a maintenance electrician and so I was hired immediately and worked there until the war was over. To all intents and purposes the war ended in 1945 and although the naval supply officer wanted to find me a job in the naval shipyard in Brooklyn, I chose to resign and seek a job in private industry which I did by taking a job as an electrician with a marine electrical contractor. Soon after I met a girl who eventually became my wife and we had 3 children, and the first born who was a boy, "yep you guessed it", I named him Richard and that is where the name Richard ended because eventually my son Richard who did have 4 sons chose not to name either one of them "Richard." And so that is a history that ended after several hundred years, and is the sign of the modern times we live in, but I accepted it with some degree of reticence. I had 3 children of my own, Richard the eldest, then my daughter Patricia, and finally a son David. Richard lives in a little town called Bennet about 40 miles from Denver, Colorado. My eldest daughter Patricia lives in St. Louis, Missouri, and my youngest son David is working in Northern New Guinea as a business administrator along with his wife and they have no children. Back to my own private life, I got divorced after 17 years of marriage and have lived alone since 1969, but I have some good friends with whom I come in contact fairly often, and apart from that I manage to keep my mind occupied with taking care of myself health

wise. I thoroughly enjoyed working for the Marine electrical industry because anything to do with shipping was something that I grew up with and the fact that it was never dull, considering that overtime was always a possibility and very often a fact, when I had to work 7 days a week for as long as 6 months with going 12 hours a day Monday to Friday, 10 hours on Saturday and 8 hours on Sunday, and very often worked 24 hours around the clock and twice that I worked 2 days and 2 nights without stopping except for Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner. So you can see that working on ships was never dull, and very often in fact humorous because of things occurring that invariably had spontaneous humor in them.

I lived in Brooklyn and Long Island for close to 20 years, and then I got the bright idea to move to Tampa Florida, because of the cold winters in New York but soon changed my mind because the wage scale was about half of what it was in New York. So back I came to New York and settled down in Wantagh, Long Island and remained there for 10 years when my doctor advised me to move to a warmer climate and so I came to California and have lived there for 35 years in Santa Monica which is large enough in size to equal the 5 square miles of Saba Island, and the only difference between the two is the geographical location and mode of living, but are the two places where I have spent the most of my life, and have enjoyed living in both immensely. Just about 18 years ago I was lucky enough to get an apartment in Santa Monica and when I went there the board of Directors asked me if I would be the entertainment chairman which I accepted and once every month would hold a "dinner dance" for all the seniors in the building who were observing their birthdays for the particular month and we would have special entertainment for them with a little band for dancing, which was enjoyed by all. After doing that for 10 years with my age creeping up on me I retired and a good thing that I did because of my having serious setbacks with my health. I enjoy living in Santa Monica because of my being in close proximity to the beach and the ocean and will always be happy here, but nothing will EVER, EVER surpass that little island of Saba where I was born and grew up having two of the best loving parents in the world in a very happy and peaceful environment, all of which could persuade me to call it "fantasy island", and for all that I offer my praise and thanks to our everlasting Almighty God for his love and care of me. END.

If you have enjoyed this just wait till I bring you the story of his grandfather Captain Richard Hassell.