

My friend Elmer Linzey

By: Will Johnson

Finally this month the tree made good on Elmer's promise. I called his wife Edwina Linzey (born Illidge) and informed her that Elmer's tree had finally flowered. He had brought the seed from Hawaii where he had been attending a conference of his beloved Lions Club. The small seed which he brought back produced a large tree in less than no time. I had planted the slip in the same spot where a flamboyant tree had been. The flamboyant was from seed which I had brought back from the grounds of the Governor's residence in Kingston Jamaica in 1976. However the tree never bore any flowers as Elmer had guaranteed that he had seen in Hawaii. When Elmer enquired about the status of the tree I informed him that it was already that big that he could bring a hammock and sling it in the tree and take a siesta anytime he wanted to. After all it was his tree.

Every hand while when I am travelling I dream something or the other about Elmer. We take the dreams of the place where we live and the people we know with us. Wherever I am my dreams are from the islands. I have this recurrent dream that I am walking up the old Front Street of my youth with no cars around and I get lost in between the former old mansions. In that dream there is never a person in sight and it is always at night.

I did not know Elmer when I was growing up. He was some years older than I. By the time I went to The Bottom to school in 1953 and 1954, Elmer had been living in New York by his Aunt Mrs. Othella Maude Edwards born Jackson. He had even served in the United States army in the war of the Korean Peninsula. He did not get there but served in Germany. He went to South Korea to attend a Lions Convention many years after the war.

The poet tells us that "Man does not live by bread alone, but by the lyrics of poets, the wisdom of sages, the holiness of saints, the biographies of great souls. " My friend Elmer was a great soul and I will attempt at paying tribute to him in this short biography.

Elmer Wycliffe Linzey was born on Saba on August 28th, 1933 and died in New Jersey on January 1st 2007. I not only did the eulogy when he was buried but also a speech on January 11th, 2002 when the GEBE power plant at the Fort Bay was named in his honour. I will quote from those and other speeches and times when I spoke in honour of my friend Elmer.

The first time that I had a confrontation with Elmer was also the last time as we became fast friends after that. It was 1973. I had won the elections in 1971 convincingly but not allowed to hold office because the "powers" that be kept me out of office by a false interpretation of the Islands Regulations.

I wanted to be involved. I wrote a letter to the Saba Artisans Foundation to join the board. I was rejected. I wrote a letter to them insinuating that perhaps it was because of my colour that I was not wanted on the board. The next day coming up from the Bottom, Elmer stopped me and shouted me down. He said my letter was unacceptable and that he wanted to meet with me. He said whether you

are in office or not the people elected you as their leader. I will not accept this kind of behavior from you. The next day Elmer and I met and he gave me a proper dressing down as to what he considered unacceptable behavior coming from a leader. From then until he died we lived as brothers and I listened to his advice.



Balthasar Gracian a Jesuit priest and philosopher in “The Art of Worldly Wisdom”, back in 1637 wrote:

“Cultivate relationships with those who can teach you. Let friendly intercourse be a school of knowledge, and let culture be taught through conversation. Thus you make your friends your teachers and mingle the pleasures of conversation with the advantages of instruction. Sensible people enjoy alternating pleasures: you are rewarded with applause for what you say and you gain instruction from what you hear. We are always attracted to others by our own interests, but in this case it is of a higher kind. Wise people frequent the houses of great nobility as theatres of heroism not temples of vanity. They are renowned for their worldly wisdom, not only for being oracles of all nobleness by their example and their behavior, but because those who surround them form a courtly academy of worldly wisdom of the best and noblest kind.”

For about fifteen years a group of us used to gather at Scout’s Place for fresh coffee and good conversation. The group included besides me, Elmer Linzey, George Seaman, Harry Nietzman, Carl Anslyn, Walter Campbell, Carlyle Granger and others who from time to time would join our table. I remember once that from another table with tourists from the United States, a young lady walked over and spoke to us. She said that her table was fascinated by our conversation. She said that that type of group would be hard to find anywhere in her country. Not only from the familiarity with each other of different races and nationalities, but in general just the way we communicated with each other and

were so knowledgeable on world affairs. I am the only one left from that group. They were all older than me. When I think of all the friends here and elsewhere that have gone and left me I am reminded of a poem by the Curacao poet Pierre Lauffer. He wrote:

“Sing me a song of yesteryears
So that I may brighten up my old age;
Tell me a tender story of times gone by,
So that I may close my eyes and remember;
Lie to me and tell me I’m still young
So that wide awake, I can sit and dream,
Tell me without flinching,
That my beard is not gray
So that I may indulge in the illusion
Of many days to come
Before I go.”



Pieter-Dirk Uys wrote: “My home is here. I feel just as at home overseas, but think my roots are here and my language is here and my rage is here and my hope is here. You know all the peculiarities of the

people around you, because you are one of them. And naturally, memories are the most important. Your home is where your favourite memories are.”

When we dedicated the power plant in Elmer’s name in my speech I made some statements which are



still relevant today

“It is remarkable how life has changed in one or two generations. My grandfather James Horton Simmons used to be called on by the government, along with the rest of the able bodied men on Saba, once a year, to clean the Kings Highway. That grand name was given to a road little more than a goat path. For this he received two cents in cash money or the equivalent in rum or tobacco. The rest of the

year he had to struggle to survive from the land and the sea along with 2500 other people who lived here at the time. My father Daniel Thomas Johnson was a government foreman. When he could find work he was paid fls. 2.50 a day. He would leave his home at Behind-The-Ridge at 5am, after first having fed his livestock, and he would come with his oil lantern down to the Fort Bay road to put in a full eight hours of work. When he died at the age of 64 in 1972 he did not have an old age pension and had never made more than f. 99.—a quincenna with government. Most people make as much in a day now as my father made in a month. The hard labour of our forefathers has repeatedly been under attack. Not only attacks from the elements, but also from human destructive forces, which are always breaking down while others are trying to build up. We are still being confronted with those of parasitic tendencies whose sole mission are to break down in words and deeds, the work of others while not being able to demonstrate anything tangible which they have done.



For the short period I have left in government, I thought that we should honour people who have contributed to the welfare of Saba and its people. People who have demonstrated that life can be rewarding when we dedicate our lives to the welfare of others. Without a doubt Mr. Elmer Linzey is preeminent among those who have made their mark on the slow march forward by our people. By introducing electricity to Saba, he abolished slavery in its second form, and made it possible for Saba to enter the 20th century. We were living two centuries behind the rest of the world when Elmer and his aunt Mrs. Maude Othella Edwards founded the Saba Electric Company. Elmer grew up on Saba in humble circumstances. Raised by his mother Nurse Laura Linzey he went on to New York to study and live at his aunt's place in Harlem. There he also met his future wife Edwina Illidge (sister of Ramona Illidge). He told me many stories of his stay in New York. The years of struggle, to get funds together to realize his dream. His army years. His doubts as to whether he would survive the army. His thankfulness

in later years as to the good medical coverage he received from the army. When I visited him at the Veterans cancer hospital in Brooklyn he told me once again of his time in the army.

I recall one day sitting with a friend of mine at Scout's Place. She was a cousin of the Rockefeller family.

When Elmer came to join us he spoke so familiar to the lady that I remarked. "It seems that I don't have to introduce you two." She laughed and said: "I know Elmer when he was a young man coming down from New York with his first engine. She and her deceased husband had been on the same ship as they loved freighter travel. And then Elmer went on to tell the story of how when he got to Saba after going via Trinidad and Aruba and so on, that the engine fell overboard while being landed at the Fort Bay here on Saba. It did not stay in the water for too long. The people of Saba got together, lashed the engine with ropes at the bottom of the sea and towed it in to shore. The engine was overhauled and worked for the next thirty years. Elmer was more or less forced to sell the Saba Electric Company so that the Federal Government could form the GEBE Company to serve the three Windward Islands. He served as Manager of GEBE Saba until he retired. After that he was appointed as a Member of the Board of GEBE. During that time he made sure that Saba was upgraded. He also felt strongly that the company should never be split up. He also had a long career in the Lions Club. He was District Governor for the Caribbean region and received many awards. His years of service to the Saba Artisans Foundation and the Saba Conservation Foundation, I will speak to his years as a pioneer and a patriot. He served with me on the Island Council for eight years. I remember when we lost the election in 1987. I was at Scout's Place and he came in all enthusiastic and excited. I reminded him that we had lost the election. He said: "Will where have you been? We have won all five seats on the Island Council. You are good for four and with me on board the two of us count for five." And with that upbeat assessment the mood changed around and we set out to govern the island from the opposition benches. At least we made so much noise that in later years newspapers on other islands wrote that one never got the feeling that I was in opposition but rather running the government all the time.

Elmer Linzey was indeed a pioneer." But the work of the pioneer is always costly. He builds the road and he suffers the travails of road building; but very often he does not reap the full reward of his work.

V.H. Friedlander writes the following about our pioneers like Elmer Linzey:

"We shall not travel by the road we make,
Ere day by day the sound of many feet,
Is heard upon the stones that now we break,
We shall come to where the cross-roads meet.
For us the heat by day, the cold by night,
The inch slow progress and the heavy load,
And death at last to close the long grim fight
With man and beast and stone;
FOR THEM THE ROAD.
For them the shade of trees that now we plant,
The safe smooth journey and the ultimate goal,

Yeah, birthright in the land of covenant.
For us a day labour travail of the soul.
And yet the road is ours, as never theirs;
Is not one thing on us alone bestowed?
For us the master-joy, oh pioneers-
We shall not travel, but we make the road."

So Elmer Wycliffe Linzey, pioneer and patriot; Man of wisdom and integrity; Man of dedication and achievement; Man of destiny. National Hero. We salute you and we shall always remember you, great hearted friend and comrade of the way, valiant and courageous soul, we commend you to God's keeping until the day breaks and the shadows flee away.

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