

## IN HIS OWN WORDS

### RALPH MILBURN SIMMONS

By: Will Johnson

In the nineteen sixties and early seventies Dr. Julia Crane did Saba and St. Eustatius an immense service by recording the lives of many of our people in her two books "Saba Silhouettes" and "Statia Silhouettes". Much of our oral history would have been lost without these two books. I consult them often for information when writing articles and the interviews bring back so many memories of friends that I knew and the stories which they tell of life on these two islands in former times. Those were the days when we were independent and survived from the land and the sea around us. One of these persons was Ralph Milburn Simmons born on Saba on July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1912 and who passed his last years on St. Eustatius. He was a good friend of mine but also of my brother Freddie. They were always exchanging packages. Ralph would send jack fish and yams from Statia and Freddie would send red snapper and Irish potatoes from Saba. Ralph used to live right next to the Seventh Day Adventist Church on Statia. I used to stay by Mrs. Wilda Gibbs right across the street from him.



I started staying by Wilda in 1969 when I was running for Senator. I had such a good showing on Statia in that election that I would go over there on weekends from St. Maarten. I can see her before me now reading her Bible by the old kerosene light. She used to tell me stories about the past as well.

Ralph took me under his wing and used to give me advice as to who was a crook and who was with me. Good things to know in the treacherous world of politics. Furthermore he informed me that we had to be family as his grandfather was a white man William Augustus Simmons born June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1844 who died July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1893. His parents were William Simmons and Rebecca Haddock Beal. He was 48 years old when he died. He had remained a bachelor but had fathered a child William Augustus Simmons by a “lady of colour” Catharine Heliger when he was 19 in the year 1863.

Ralph’s brother Adrian Williston born 26 May 1910 was a good friend of mine as well. He came back to Saba in his old age. He had a laundry in Jamaica, New York and did well. I used to visit him in a large two storey brick building there. His wife was from Virginia. My cousin Lenny Johnson as well as Lenous used to visit him in Jamaica. He fixed a pension for my uncle Leonard from the Seaman’s union. When he was on Saba he would always be passing at the office to speak to the “Kings Attorney” which was my brother Eric. I always thought of that as a cool title to have. That was what the old timers used to call the Public Prosecutor. That title conveys images of the King coming around to your office or home to look for advice. Now that Saba is back under Holland we should start referring to that position as the Kings Attorney. That depends though who holds the office as he might get carried away with it and refer the King to the back door. Funny people here in these islands, real funny people.

Adrian built a house on Saba in his old age and he left it to his brother Ralph. Their mother was Rachel Heyliger. Their father at the age of 24 on June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1885 had married Alexandrien Linzey, age 19. They had only one child Emerald born in 1891 and who died a month later.

After his first wife died he then married Rachel Heyiger on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1910 when he was 48 and she 24. In the books her name is Richard Heyliger. Can you imagine naming a girl child Richard. Anyway someone in the office must have realized that there was a mistake and gave her the name Rachel. Her parents were Laurence Heyliger and Clothilde Cappell. Together they had five children.

Ralph’s father who was a seaman by profession died at the age of 58 in 1922.

I will let Ralph tell his own story as recorded in Statia Silhouette. He was so into the name Will Johnson that in the interview instead of Capt. Will Leverock he has me as one of the captains which he sailed under.

‘My name is Ralph Milburn Simmons. I was born twenty-fifth o’ July, nineteen hundred and twelve. I was born in Saba.

My father used to be a cook on the four-masted schooners. He was named Augustus, my mother was named Rachel. And they had five of us, three boys and two girls. I’m the second.

The one that died in the States, he was the first. Adrian, myself, Sylvie, Thelma and George. But then my brother went to St. Thomas. The oldest brother, when he was only about seventeen, eighteen. Then, those days, anybody could go in, no trouble, but not now.”

“Our father died in Saba in 1922, and I was livin’ in Barbados with my aunt at that time. “Cause my aunt had liked me, and I lived with her. I went Barbados twice. And the First World War I remember seeing some o’ the soldiers comin’ home disfigured and all that. But I was just a small boy then. I was about seven years then. Yeah, that was the first time then. And then that was around 1919 so. I used to go Bay Street Boys School. They were pretty strict in the school there, yes, pretty strict. I remember the teacher was a man by the name o’ Taylor. He used to teach the third class. Good fields to play ball on. But we didn’t play with no big boys; we played with just small boys those days. And those boys, if they saw you was a stranger, they all looked to make trouble with you and tease you and all that, you know. And then my mother went up there with some o’ the children, and things wasn’t so nice up there in Barbados. And after that as I told you, I came back to Saba with my mother. I think about four of us. Maybe the whole five, the whole five of us was up Barbados. I was twelve years when I came back from Barbados. We came down on the schooner, got off St. Maarten, and then we came home. Well, the house was there for us to live in. It was a British schooner. The schooner was named “Florence Stream”. And then after that we were there with our mother.

“We had to help our grandfather with the cow. Never had more than one cow. We had to go and cut grass. And sometime we plant some potato, just in the hill above us. That was when we came from school in the evenin’ or early in the mornin’. Those days we didn’t go school until nine o’clock. Nine o’clock in the mornin’ till twelve and from one to three. But at that time our grandfather was livin’, my mother’s father (Laurence Heyliger). And then after that we came a little bigger, about thirteen years, then our mother got in some trouble. Somebody stole something and they give it to her, and then she had to try and get out ‘o the country. She went and she lived in St. Barths, and from there then she went St. Thomas. The oldest boy and the eldest girl was there with her. And she died down there in 1926. Then we still used to go down on the bay and make a – well, you know, something they called a shilling. Make a shilling or two shillings sometime. We were still minors, and we stood there a couple o’ years after that. But that time our grandfather, his first wife Clothilde, she died; and we had – he married a younger woman. And we used to live with her, the balance of us. But she wasn’t very nice. She was young, and she more keep with the younger sets. At that time he used to sail on those schooners goin’ to St. Kitts and St. Maarten.

“And then Curacao open. Then I got a job on the schooner that used to transport passengers to Curacao, what we call “moose boy.” Yes. Five dollars a month in those days. But five dollars was plenty money those days. There were no real tourists, just immigrants, immigrants. The

schooner used to carry immigrants down to Curacao to find work, you see. So in between you may find a couple- 'cause they was no steamers those days. In between you find a big shot then would be travellin'. Those schooners would belong to Tommy Vanterpool. I don't know if you heard about him. He died in St. Thomas. He died in St. Thomas."

And then after that I learned how to steer a ship. And then there was another schooner named the "Three Sisters", three-mast. A ship came in one day while I was down there, in Curacao, and they said they wanted some men. And I asked the captain – the captain was named Will Johnson, from St. John's – and I asked the captain to let me stay off, and he told me all right. And there I started my way up. Curacao was good in those days, those early days. Things were pretty cheap, very cheap. Sometimes a bunch of us used to, live together. I remember when we used to be sailin' on those ships. The wages was seventy-five guilders a month. Every three months they used to give you a tin o' butter, a five-pound tin o' butter. That was good money! Good money those days. We used to go on a ship with our suit, suit and necktie. Change it when we get on board the ship, put on our workin' clothes. We used to go to Maracaibo. Every three days so we come back.



Two trips a week. When it was your turn to come town you come town. Otherwise you stay aboard till maybe the next trip you come town. But you had to have somebody aboard. The food was very bad those days. The officers were pretty good, from Holland. In between about three ships you used to find captains from England. About three ships.

"I stood a couple o' years there in Curacao, came back to Saba, then keep goin' and comin'. Then finally, when everybody said they was going I went to Aruba too, and I got a job on those Lago boats, around 1931, around 1931, for twelve years. But at those time when I became improved to more manhood I used to drink plenty you see. I used to drink plenty. That was only eighty guilders a month at those days. The wages was a little more than Curacao, a little more;

but you didn't have to dress down there like you dress in Curacao. You'd go ashore rough and ready. Yeah the ship was much better. The food wasn't so nice because they had Chinese, Chinese cooks take it and throw it after you like that. Yeah. Mostly all ships had a Chinese. And after that I stood there, year run into year. Sometime I lost me job and I'd be sitin' down quite a while. Then I came to Curacao. And then finally I met a woman in Curacao, after I came up to Curacao, and we got married, in '48. She was born in St. Kitts – or Santo Domingo somewhere. But she came here to Statia. At that time she used to work with the Pandts. You know the Pandts down by the cottage? Well she used to work with them. And then she went to Curacao, and there I met her and we got married. We had four children in Curacao.

“Well, as you know, when you's on the ship you have to paint. Yeah, you have to paint. I could paint fairly good, not the best. But with housepaintin' I was – begin to paint from 1948, 1948. And then I went on a British tanker. There's when I went to Morehead City, North Carolina; to Tampa, Florida; Jacksonville Florida; all those places I went on that tanker. But it wasn't much money. And then I left the ship, and then I used to continue painting with contractors. But I wasn't getting on so good. As I told you, I used to drink plenty. But then after I said, well, it was all nonsense, it was all nonsense. People laughin' at you, and you think you was doing good but you wasn't doing good. Thirty-three years, I haven't drink a beer now. Yeah. I have drink whiskey, but I never been drunk since I been here for the twenty-seven years. I have quite a few years now I haven't interfered with it.

Ralph came to Statia in 1958 to live where his wife had a house and remained there until he died.

He goes on to tell many stories about his family, but we will suffice for this article with the following: “I know plenty about fishin'. Deep-sea fishing, deep-sea fishing. Well, I'm getting too old for that. I have done plenty of that, here in Statia and in Saba also. Yes. And I know plenty sailor, sailorizin', yes. Yeah, I know plenty about sailorizin'. I can steer good, very well; and I know many things. I can sew canvas, I can make the firm knots and all that, yeah.”

“I used to go fishing in Saba pretty often, mostly nighttime. Sometime we leave – those were days when we didn't have any motor. We used to set sail around one o'clock the day, reach down on the bank around four or five the evenin', and then leave around three o'clock the next mornin' to come back home. We had to pull oars. Sometime we get a good catch. Twenty, twenty-five, thirty fish a night – each man, each man got. But those days fish was very cheap, half guilder a pound. That's around '35, around '35 and '36 so. But then after I went away and came back home we used to still go, but then they had motors. Had motors, and the price of fish had raised up some. But then fishin' ain't so thick as like those days. Mostly [in Saba I went] with James Linzey. Mostly. Sometimes with Carlton Heyliger. He died. Carlton died. Many, many people, different – you know Kenneth Peterson? I was in the same boat. Didn't have so much

luck. You know Randolph Dunkin? I used to sail with him. He had a boat named "Santa Lu." Yeah. And there was another schooner by the name – named the "Diamond Ruby." I used to sail on the "Virginia" first. That was a government schooner (Capt. Abram Mardenborough). I was a moose boy at that time, what they called captain's boy. Cleaned the lamps and carried the food to the captain and the mate and some passengers, if they had any. The "Diamond Ruby". Charlie Barnes, he was from St. John's. He had a big business on St. Barts. And those are all the schooners that I used to sail on.

Well, it's no need for me sayin' anything about the road in Saba because I wasn't home when it was built. I was not home. When I left Saba they didn't even have a vehicle in Saba. And when I came back there was – now they have quite a few. Oh yeah. Must have close to 300 now."

I can hear him talking now. This interview was done in the month of July 1977. I was on St. Eustatius with my family staying at the Berkel plantation in the "country". No electricity over there at Lynch plantation then. We stayed two weeks and every day we went into town, to get fresh bread, pass by Mr. Charlie Arnold for ice cream for the boys and to listen to good stories, and pass by all the old friends. Dr. Julia Crane was there also doing interviews for her book. We were great friends and I helped her with research and with getting funding for her books. I enjoy going back into the lives of these old timers so that I can learn to appreciate what we have today.

Recordar es Vivir. (To remember is to live).