

The "Blue Peter"

By; Will Johnson

The legendary schooner the "Blue Peter" was purchased in 1947 by the Dutch colonial government. She belonged to an American couple who used her as their private yacht and they sold her while they were in the harbor of Willemstad visiting Curacao. The "Blue Peter" was well built of solid oak. As a yacht she had been to various parts of the world.

From 1947 to 1961 she served the three Dutch Windward Islands as well as St. Kitts. She maintained a regular year round schedule between these islands. Her schedule was regularly typed out and posted on the bulletin boards here on Saba. The "Blue Peter" was 15.35 meters long, 5.25 meters wide with a draft of 2.44 meters and a tonnage of 45.55 of 2.83 m3. If she had a fault it was that her engine was not powerful enough for the role she had to play and the waters in which she had to operate.



The first Captain of the "Blue Peter" was Hubert Arsene Hodge, originally of the village of Grand Case. His older brother Thadeus was the more famous of the two brothers, and had been a lifelong sailor and captain. Captain Arsene (called Austin) was first Captain of the motor launch the "Trixie" which operated the same service before the "Blue Peter" entered the scene. Logically Captain Hodge was the one assigned by the government to take over the "Blue Peter". In the course of her career in the Windward Islands many articles were written about her and her captain in newspapers in Europe and the United States. Some interesting photos survive of the old schooner. She remained in the news especially in the Dutch press when John "Buchie" Craane of Bonaire took over the command in 1955. He was the son of a legendary boat builder Echi Craane of Bonaire. One of "Buchie's" sisters married the well-known Bonaire politician Julio Abraham (1909-1960). Another sister married a Dutch police officer named Smeins and managed to present the old Dutchman with no less than 24 children. Yes you have read it correctly TWENTY FOUR. Coming from a maritime tradition "Buchie" was well equipped to handle the "Blue Peter". He remained on St. Maarten until he died at the age of 92 on February 28th, 2009. I sailed with

him a number of times on the "Blue Peter". During the time that she served the islands (1947-1961) Saba had no airport so that one was obliged at all times to take a boat to and from Saba. I have many fond memories of trips which I made on that old schooner. Even though I would get sea sick like a dog back then, looking back there was something romantic sailing around the islands on such a lovely old schooner.

In 1961, she was replaced by the motor vessel the "M.V. Hertha", also captained by Craane and which maintained the service until 1963. The "M.V. Hertha" was named in honour of the spouse of the then Lt. Governor Jan Jacob "Japa" Beaujon and it belonged to Mr. Chester Wathey.

The "Blue Peter" left the Windward Islands in 1961 for Curacao where she had been purchased in 1947. There she was docked up and languished in the harbor until she was purchased by Buchi de Jongh of Bonaire. She was refitted and left with only one mast. She was equipped with a 220 horsepower G.M. 671 diesel engine. Also her name was changed to Isidel 1. The family De Jongh were owners of among others the schooner FOCA and coasters Isidel 11 and Isidel 111. The "Isidel 1" transported cargo and passengers between Curacao and Bonaire, but occasionally she also sailed to Aruba and to ports in Venezuela. Echi (Ellis Petrus) Craane the legendary boat builder did the remodeling work on the "Blue Peter" for her conversion to the "Isidel 1".



On July 25th, 1978 the "Blue Peter" (Isidel 1) came to a tragic end with the loss of seven people including her captain and crew. My friend the famous "Boi" Antoin is the author of a small booklet entitled "E Ultimo Biahi di Isidel". For those who can read Papiamentoe, this booklet contains interesting information about the seven persons who disappeared with the Isidel 1 in the night of July 25th, 1978. There was much speculation as to what had caused her to sink. She had left Curacao in good weather headed as usual to Bonaire with a load of cargo and with 7 people on board. There was speculation that there had been an explosion on board caused by a cooking gas cylinder, or that a large tanker had run

her over. One will never know for sure. Parts of the Isidel 1 were found on the North coast of Curacao later on and were identified by Evy de Jongh and Echi Craane and the information was included in the Police report about the disappearance of the "Isidel 1".



In the book "Naar de West" the journalist Piet Bakker (the same one who complained that they served him lobster for every meal on St. Maarten), described the voyage which he made to Saba and St. Eustatius with the "Blue Peter" and Captain Austin Hodge in 1948. The illustrated book with photos taken by the author was sponsored by the Douwe Egberts tobacco company. Mr. Bakker described the schooner, her captain and the crew in romantic terms. The story brings back many fond memories to me of the many trips I made between the islands on that lovely old schooner. Seasick or not I always look back with much appreciation to the days of sail between the islands and especially to the days of sailing on the "Blue Peter" that loveliest of schooners.

