

Time for Remembering

In doing research for my book "For The Love Of St.Martin", I had a lively correspondence with many people. Pack rat that I am I have held on to most of the correspondence. Nothing is organized of course. Too busy for that and I need professional help. Anyway Wim Hart asked me to do an article for St.Maarten's Day. Being pressed for time I want to share with the readers a story "Time For Remembering" written by the late Irene Van Romondt for her granddaughter Nancy. I have three versions of this story written at different times in her life. One of the other more extensive ones was published years ago by The Chronicle with a photo of Irene and of Belvedere. It is good to read how the "landed gentry" lived in former times on St.Maarten. Next year God willing I will contribute my own story of the many wonderful memories I have of the years I lived on St.Maarten. But let me pass on this compliment to the people of St.Maarten first. A couple of weeks ago I was visiting the Home For the Aged. There I had a conversation with Mr. Carlyle Granger. He said that he had told his son recently that he had visited eleven countries in South America, also Mexico and twenty three countries around the Caribbean. He said the most enjoyable, memorable, and rewarding vacations he had ever spent had been right there on Sint Maarten. I agree with what he said. Happy St.Maarten's Day.

Time for Remembering

Dear Nancy,

Just recently there was an article in the Saturday Evening Post about St.Martin, the little island in the Caribbean where I was born. Eleanor and I were discussing the article and she decided that I should write for you some of the things I remember about my life in these West Indian Islands. I am not a good story teller but I will try.

I will tell first how the Van Romondt's came to live on St.Martin. In the early eighteen hundreds the rulers of Holland needed a wise and distinguished man to be Governor of their newly acquired half of the island of St.Martin. (The other half was and is still owned by France). And so they chose Diederick Johannes van Romondt, a gentleman from the City of Utrecht, and already in the service of his government. He was 'Master Of The Mint'. This post would be equivalent to the Treasurer of the United States nowadays.

When he arrived with his band of colonists and retinue of servants the island was practically a wilderness. The Spanish had discovered and inhabited it for sometime, then the English. But when they found out that there was no easy gold or wealth to be found they deserted the island. And so this band of intrepid Dutchmen settled the island and ruled wisely over the remnants of the early Spanish and English settlers.

In those days anyone with money could own slaves and so they sailed to the neighbouring islands and traded and bought slaves. These slaves cultivated sugar cane from which sugar, molasses and rum is made. They tilled the fields, built the sturdy houses and in fact helped to create the vast estates which the future generations of van Romondts were to own.

For several generations the descendants of Governor D.J. van Romondt ruled St.Martin. In each generation there was always one who was appointed Governor, and my daddy who would be your great grandpa was the last of the line to act as Governor.

He came from a family of eighteen sisters and brothers. All the brothers had been sent away to school and college. Some went to Holland, some to England or Scotland and some of them to the United States.

My Daddy attended Princeton University in New Jersey. His name was the same as the old Governors. Diederick Johannes, but he was known to all his friends, family and servants as "Mr. Joe."

As the young men completed their education and returned to their island, their father (A.A. van Romondt) who was a wealthy merchant established them in business or gave each one of them an estate which included one on the old manor houses. My Daddy lived at Belvedere an estate tucked away in the high hills about three miles from the town of Philipsburg which is the only town and the seat of government of the Dutch part of the island.

Here I was born on June 7th, 1900. I must have been a spoiled little brat, because I had everything that anyone could desire heaped upon me; so much to eat and drink, all good things grown on Belvedere, hundreds of acres to wander over and play in, fond parents to love spoil and protect me; a coloured nurse whose sole responsibility I was whether asleep or awake.

In another few years a sister Edith and a brother Dick came along, and as they were born they each had a coloured nurse or Mammy designated to take care of them.

The first thing I remember about 'my little girl-self' the day that Edith had a tooth ache. Her nurse took her on her lap and sang to her and rocked her to sleep. I was so jealous of the attention she was getting that I faked a toothache so that I could be sung to and rocked. I can still remember my nurse Mary Anna saying; "Now Miss Irene you ain't got no toothache, but I'll sing to you anyways", and sing she did and rock me in her arms she did until I fell asleep.

A hurricane the next thing that stands out in my memory is the hurricane on March 8th, 1908. How the wind did blow and how it howled through the branches of the big tamarind tree which stood outside mothers bed room. This tree is ancient. It must be 500 to 1000 years old and was much taller than the highest peak of the roof. The hurricane was so fierce we were afraid the roof would be blown off or that the tamarind tree would be uprooted and fell on the house. So in the middle of the night mother came to our room gathered the three of us up and put us in bed between herself and Papa.

The house shook on its solid concrete foundation. We heard the tearing sound of a big tree falling, but it was not the tamarind tree or I would not be here to tell you these tales, it was the big frangipani tree in the front yard. Towards morning the winds abated and Papa must have dozed off. He snored and snored hard. I had never heard a man snore before and so I became even more frightened than I had been from the hurricane. I was sure some wild animal was under the bed and was growling and ready to spring, So the March 1908 hurricane was a night to remember.

First school days. The nearest school was three miles away, over rough dirt roads up and down mountains and down down until we reached the town of Philipsburg which was at sea level on the 'Great Bay'. This town was built on a sand bar, just two streets wide, between the blue Caribbean on one side and the bluer salt lake on the other.

My step grandma and my daddy's half-sister lived in town. Here I was sent to be tutored by them and prepared for school. Grandma was a lady of the Victorian era. She believed that children should be seen and not heard. That they should be punished

severely when they misbehaved. That they should have no light to see them to bed and no nurse to sleep at the foot of the bed and be at your beck and call.

My what a change this was from the easy life and all the indulgences I had had at Belvedere. I was lonely. I missed Edith and Dick and had to play all by myself in the fenced in garden. How I looked forward to Friday evening when the horse and buggy would be sent from Belvedere to take me home for the weekend.

The first evening at grandma's dinner table she served pea soup. I did not like pea soup and said so. She told me 'you will eat it, or if you don't it will be served to you again for breakfast and every meal until you do eat it.' Well I was still full of fresh milk, home made bread and butter all the good things that we usually had at Belvedere, so I did not eat it. The next morning I had it and a glass of milk for breakfast. I drank the milk and left the pea soup. At lunch the coloured cook served it again and leaned over and whispered; "You ain't going get nothing else, so you better eat it up." By this time I was so hungry I ate it and anything else that was ever served to me in that house.

In a few months Edith was sent in to grandmas to school also. Now I have never been afraid of the dark, but poor little Edith was, and every night when we were sent to bed in the dark bed room she had the horrors and imagined that every piece of the large old mahogany furniture in the room was something to be feared.

I'm Free.

One wet rainy Friday afternoon I was playing all alone in the fenced in garden. I can remember I was chopping up the thick meaty leaf of a cactus plant making believe that it was a meal. I was cooking it for my children (four beautiful French dolls imported especially for me). I was so lonely and I kept wondering why the horse and carriage had not come to take me home for the weekend. When grandma called me I got the surprise of my life.

Aunty Clem had come for me. She was mother's unmarried sister who had always loved me as her own and spoiled me very much. She had persuaded Papa to open up his town house again after many years. This house is called Dicky Dicks after the man who built it and it must be hundreds of years old. It was standing long before the Dutch came to St. Martin. It is a huge rambling house built over a poured concrete first storey. The salt lake is at the foot of the back yard. A huge balcony runs across the front of the house and the water cistern which supplied all of our drinking water is under the floor of the pantry and one bedroom.

Edith, Dick and I and also my nieces Belle, Lucky and Daisy lived and grew up in this rambling old house with Aunty Clem loving us and caring for us from Monday to Friday. But every Friday we were off to Belvedere and Mother and Papa for the weekend.

Aunty Clem was easy going and a semi-invalid, so we did as we pleased mostly, with a little supervision from Zilah our coloured cook and maid. (Zilah Richardson aunt of L.B.Scot, ended up owning the house on Backstreet. My brother Freddie lived there as well as Leo Chance, Kenneth van Putten, Max Nicholson etc.)

Every morning before going to school we would put on our funny looking home made bathing suits run across the two streets to the ocean and swim and play in the water for an hour or two before going to school.

School now was the Convent school run by the Dominican nuns from Holland. We went to the upstairs school with the children of all the white government officials and white families of the town and a few near whites who could afford the tuition. In the

downstairs schools were all the coloured children from the country districts and the children of the white people from the lower part of town who were not as wealthy as we were and could not afford tuition.

I went to school there until I was about 14 years old. I had covered as far as the grades went, then I persuaded my parents to let me go to New York to school. I went with my uncle Lewis who had property and summered in the USA every year. I attended Wadleigh High School in New York City for two years, then the U.S.A. declared war (World War 1) and I was ordered home in a hurry. But that is another story.

And so we will leave off here. However it is interesting to read how the landed gentry lived one hundred years ago on St.Martin. Belevdere also included Belle Plaine at the time where cotton was grown. This latter estate was sold to Dr. Hopkins of whom I will write more at a later date.

HAPPY ST.MARTIN DAY.

Will Johnson