

STATIA'S 'MR. HISTORY' CELEBRATES 95 YEARS

WAY BACK WHEN

- Glimpses of our islands' past -

By Statia-born Historian Walter Th. Hellebrand



From helping to sink the *Bismarck* to a stint as Acting Lieutenant Governor of Statia, Siegfried Lampe has done it all in the many years that he has been around. This Wednesday, June 25, he celebrated his 95th birthday. Over the course of almost a century, he has gathered an impressive amount of knowledge and on Statia many consider him to be "Mr. History."

However, a conversation with him may just as easily jump to the environment, poetry, art or philosophy, as he is also a poet, artist and, in general, someone with a very broad interest: a proper "uomo universale."

"The best island in the Caribbean"

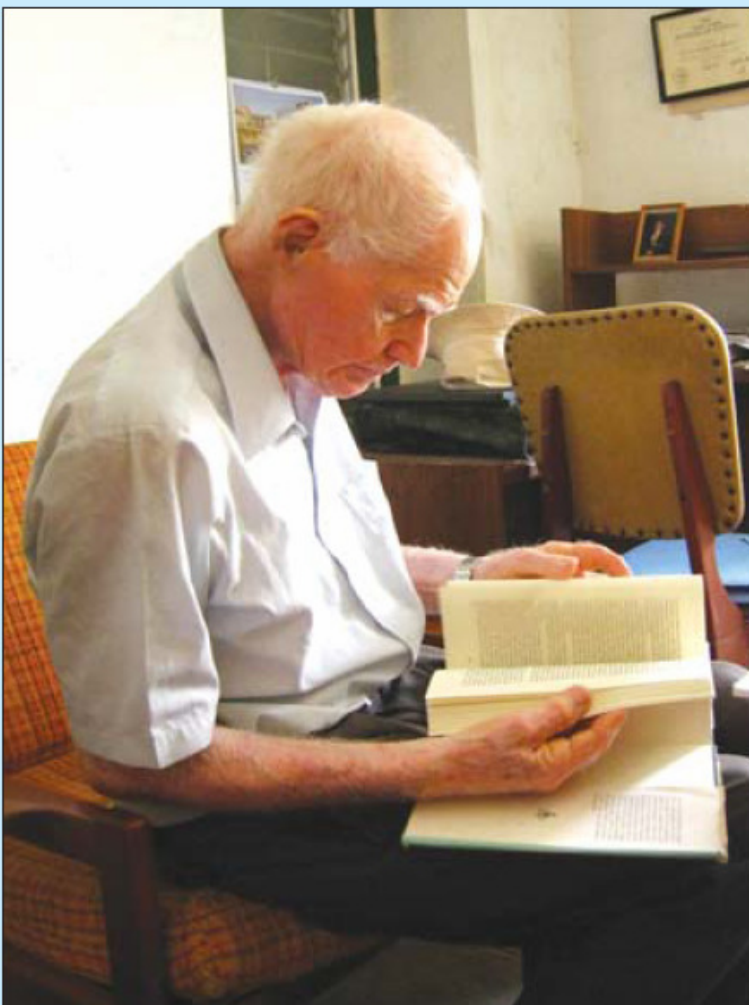
"You were born on the best island in the Caribbean," is the first thing Mr. Lampe says after greeting me, knowing that I am a Statia Man, "Not just of the Dutch islands, but of the whole Caribbean!" His patriotism is unabashed: "Statia is better than all other five Dutch islands put together. And you can quote me!"

"Statia changed the world. The United States owes its independence to this so-called little rock in the Caribbean. It was not just through the gunpowder and other military supplies which the Americans were able to obtain on Statia. It was also through the hatred that Rodney felt for Statia and that made him stay here until he fully satisfied his thirst for vengeance instead of going out to destroy the French fleet. He sent his second in command who was not able to prevent the French from sailing up to Chesapeake Bay where they defeated the British."

George Washington a dead duck

"George Washington was on his last legs, had hardly any ammunition left. Without the intervention of this French fleet he would have been a dead duck!" This naval battle was the beginning of the end for the British. Mr. Lampe feels strongly that Statia deserves a lot more recognition for its role in making the birth of the US possible: "They should be grateful!"

Mr. Lampe certainly knows how to tell a story. When he quotes Rodney's con-



1. Mr. Lampe in a typical pose: reading up on one of the many subjects that interest him.

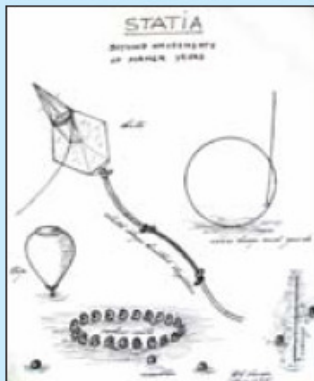
demnation of Statia (from heart!), it is as if the British Admiral is brought back to life again, in a scene from a docu-drama about the American Revolution played out in Lampe's living room, delivered with a sense of drama and rolling r's: "Had it not been for this infamous island, the American rebellion could not possibly have subsisted."

"Talk to Mr. Lampe!"

In fact, his living room already existed in Rodney's days because the house Mr. Lampe lives in is one of the oldest in Oranjestad. It used to be the library and it almost still looks like one as Mr. Lampe has always been an avid reader of books. It is one of the two houses that he grew up in. The other one is the house that Rodney actually stayed in: the present St. Eustatius Museum. He grew up surrounded by history. As his interest in Statia's past has always been widely known, new historical information from people in America or Europe always

had a way of landing on his desk. Whenever people from overseas came forward with objects or documents connected with Statia, they would always be told: "Talk to Mr. Lampe!" It was the same for researchers working on projects or books about Statia's history. As a result, he now has a unique "private archive" with all kinds of documents, pho-

tos, data and publications relating to various aspects of Statia's history. He also has a kind of virtual inventory with information about objects and items connected with Statia that ended up abroad. All this information stored in one central place, his home, makes him a "circumstantial" guardian of Statia's history. Seventy-five Guilders per month



A combination of his own life, his interest in history and his artistic talents, Mr. Lampe contributed this illustration to "Statia Silhouettes" by Julia G. Crane. Back then, cashew nuts were used to solve the shortage of marbles.

communicate with the rest of the world was by mail. Telegrams had to be sent to St. Maarten and were then brought over by sailing boat. Of course, there was no airport yet. There was not even a regular connection by sea to any of the neighbouring islands either – including St. Maarten. There were sloops and little boats going up and down all the time, but the journey was completely unpredictable. Only in 1931 was a regular fortnightly service by steamship launched to connect Curaçao, St. Thomas, St. Maarten, Saba, Statia, St. Kitts.

In 1929, the Governor of the Netherlands Antilles decided that it was time to do something about it and he instructed a radio station to be installed on Statia (and Saba). Small transmitters were built by the technical bureau of the Colonial Ministry in the Netherlands. While this all took its time, young Mr. Lampe was sent to St. Maarten to be trained as a radio operator. The government paid for his tuition to cover his expenses while away from home: 75 Guilders per month. In 1932, he returned to take Statia into the age that has come to be known as the "Age of Communication." The 75 Guilders would also be his salary as Statia's first radio operator.

Statia's first car

A few years later, Statia re-

ceived a modest telephone network. Mr. Lampe remembers it having three people with a connection: the administrator, the doctor and the police officer. He recalls his amazement as a little boy, the first time he witnessed a telephone conversation – long before the construction of this network. The director of the company then operating the factory at the beginning of the Road to White Wall (the ruins with the chimney still stand) lived at Pleasures. He had a private line installed between his house and the factory: "I could not believe it! He was talking to somebody over a quarter mile away!"

It was this same man, a British planter, who brought the first car to Statia. Mr. Lampe remembers being picked up as a kid by this automobile, the only one on the island for a long time, to join the family for tea at Pleasures.

Thank you note from the British Admiralty

As an ambitious young man, Mr. Lampe wanted to advance his career. And in his words: "You can only move on in your job if you are under the nose of your chief." And as his chief was



Siegfried Lampe, first row on the right, at the "Doncker House" where he grew up. Behind him is his niece Ada Southern who also lived in the house (now the Museum) and gave him private tuition.

on Curaçao, in 1939 he boarded the KNSM steamer Baralt and left for Willemstad.

He was there when World War II broke out. Some time into the war, the British government asked the Dutch for two of their best radio operators on Curaçao to send coded messages to their war fleet in the Atlantic. Of the twelve operators in Curaçao, Mr. Lampe was one of the two selected. "It was a very tiring job," Mr. Lampe recalls. The ciphered codes consisted only of digits and had to be sent at least six times. This was because the ships could not reply to confirm receipt of the message as that could betray their position to the German submarines preying on them. So instead the messages were sent repeatedly, just to make sure. And this would have to be done day and night. Fortunately, for Mr. Lampe, Morse is as easy as the alphabet. "I can read sixty to seventy words a minute in Morse," he explains.

After the War, Mr. Lampe heard that the British Admiralty sent a letter to "thank us all for what we had done and for helping to sink the Bismarck." He has never seen the letter, but it is clear that the two radio operators on Curaçao played an important role in supporting effective operations of the British fleet in the Atlantic.

Flying on the "Snip"
As a highly valued operator, Mr. Lampe was frequently asked to fill in for colleagues on other islands. It was the famous plane "Snip," the first KLM plane to cross the Atlantic Ocean, which took him on one of those trips: "It was shaking in the air like an old tin car!" After his retirement as supervisor of the station,



Mr. Lampe remembers his first hurricane, in 1924. He was not impressed, and still is not: "Simply hook up your house," something the owners of this house obviously failed to do in 1924. (One of Lampe's many photos documenting the past).

he stayed in Curaçao for two years, enjoying tennis, swimming and his "number one delight: physics." He always spent a lot of his time studying and following courses and in 1993 he was invited to become a member of the New York Academy of Sciences.

In 1970 he "got bored" with his life on Curaçao and returned to his beloved Statia. In 1984 he was asked to stand in for the Lieutenant-Governor who was going to be off-island for a while. He prefers to avoid the public as much as possible – "Solitude is my breath of life" – so when he agreed he added: "But only for two weeks!" It made him the first one in Statia with the title "Acting Lieutenant Governor."

The future
Having more time on his

hands, Mr. Lampe was able to return to one of his first interests: drawing. Already in the 1940s he had completed a course in "Sketching, cartooning, fashion drawing, watercolour painting and drawing," but now he could put these artistic talents to good use by providing illustrations for books such as "Statia Silhouettes." He was also able to help Dr. Joh. Hartog with his book on the forts of Statia by conducting field work and making plans of the remains he found.

With all these years of knowledge and experience behind him and the wisdom that comes with it, what does he think of the future? His answer is chillingly direct and absolute: "They are killing the earth..."

The human race (of little

grace)
Is wedded to pollution,
The ozone layer, its shield in space,
Is doomed to dissolution.
The human race (of little grace)
Through it, skies now rain acid,
But of concern, it shows no trace,
Stays unperturbed and placid.

Is this from Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth;" or from the manifesto of some new environmental organization? Well no, it is from a poem entitled "Prediction," written by Mr. Lampe twenty years ago already. From the man who remembers only one car driving around Statia comes the mantra: "The car is the ruination of the human race." He feels very strongly about the way mankind treats the

earth and its resources. Like history, nature and the environment need cherishing too. His concerns have by now become one of the hottest topics on the agenda of organizations and administrations the world over. It means that Siegfried Lampe, with all the backing of his ninety-five years, is very much a man of 2008.



Mr. Lampe as St. Eustatius' first Acting Lieutenant-Governor in 1984, with Commissioners Julian Woodley (l) and Norman Pompier (r)



Siegfried Lampe made his first watercolour painting "Cinderella" in 1942.