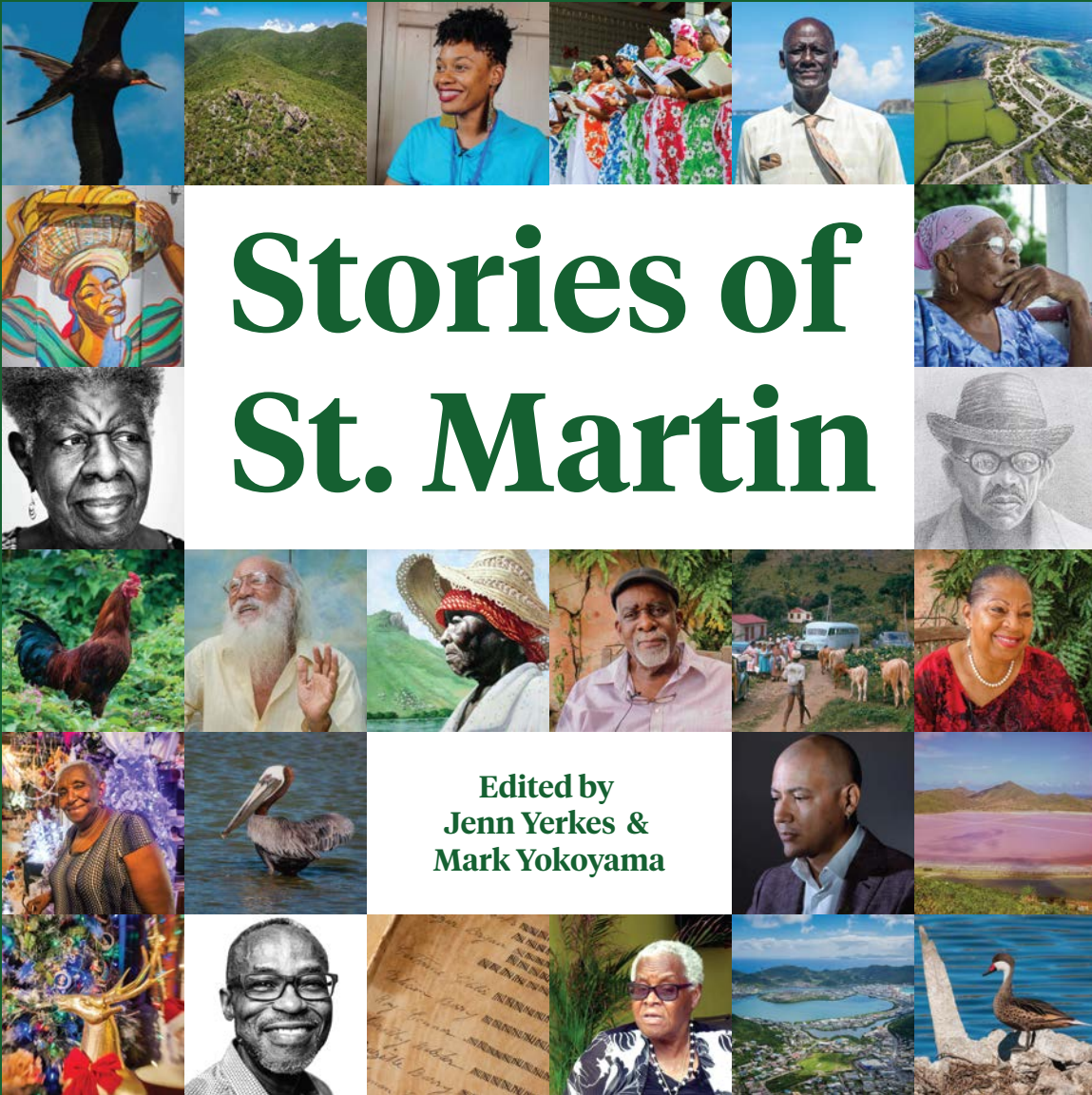


Stories of St. Martin

Edited by
Jenn Yerkes &
Mark Yokoyama



Stories of St. Martin

Dedicated to the storytellers of St. Martin — and the listeners.

Edited by Jenn Yerkes and Mark Yokoyama
2021 Les Fruits de Mer
ISBN: 9798781470525

Introduction

What is St. Martin? It's a place, but it's also the people who live here. St. Martin is people's actions and experiences. It's the memories people have of the past. It's the language people use to tell their stories.

One part of St. Martin's history was written by people from outside the island. These people were commanders and governors stationed here. They were government officials from Europe, and maybe a reporter or two passing through. Even when locals helped record this history, it was only a select few. And the things that were recorded still reflected the interests of distant colonial powers, like the selling of land or the size of the salt harvest.

But there has always been another history of St. Martin. It is an oral history, passed down from generation to generation. This important process has preserved knowledge, traditions, and culture, including the local language. This process is still happening today. Sit down with an elder and you can be part of it. Listen well!

This book collects stories told by St. Martiners about their lives. Through their words, we learn about the island and its past. We imagine a far different place that was actually right here, not so long ago. We see the joys and struggles of the people who made the island what it is today. Each story is personal, but they are all stories of St. Martin.

Table of Contents

SALT

A Beautiful Sight to See	Elise Hyman	4
We Are Children of the Salt	Tadzio Bervoets	8
They Were Like Mysterious Sculptures	Roland Richardson	12

STORM

The Birds Are Going in a Strange Direction	Josianne Fleming-Artsen	16
I See Her Come to Life on the Shutter	Ruby Bute	20
You Get a Feeling of Love	Bernadine Arnell Joe	24

WORK

Twenty-nine Days	Marcel Eugene Hodge	28
I'm from the Renaissance	Cynric Griffith	32
I Found a Box: 1848	Alfonso Blijden	36

TRADITION

We Used to Eat Fresh Things	Delphine David	40
The Serenaders	Tamara Groenveldt	42
The Conch Shell	Raymond "Big Ray" Helligar	46

A Beautiful Sight to See

Salt and salt work are a powerful part of this island's heritage. Salt was produced at the Orient Bay salt pond from the 1840s until the late 1950s. Elise Hyman from French Quarter worked there. In an interview in 2018, she described the salt work done there as the industry was coming to an end on St. Martin.

In that time, in the salt pond time, they were good times. The people was very industrious and they didn't had nothing, no other alternative but the salt pond. Everybody used to work their own garden. When the time come for the salt, you had to come out. That's what they had. Everybody had to work to that. That was all the industry they had here.

They pick it. They go in the pond in the morning early, early morning. Everybody is in the pond, picking salt. Picking, throwing in a basket. They pick it out the pond, put it in a basket — bum! — you throw it in a flat. They do that all day.

When they get this flat full, they row it in to the shore. Then somebody there in the flat shoveling it out and the younger people come and they transport it on the shore, on the dry shore. You take it now from the spot where you take it from the flat, throw it on the ground, so all the water run out so it's dry.

Afternoon, half-past two, three o'clock, Mr. John Gumbs come. He is going to come to measure it. He come to measure it and he is the one who putting down all those marks in the book. This is the reaping figures.

Everybody get up and going back and forth. Pack it. You taking it up, to big piles. As big as this house it used to be. You had to go up steps, ladders, to go up. You go up, you throw it down all the time. They got big, big piles. Oh, boy.

May 26 To Reapin
 To L.G. Britt for Bags
 for Rental Bags. C. W.
 thread for Salt Bags.
 Repairs to Boat shade.
 Making of Salt Bags.
 6 Lats Paint. Boats & Bags
 Nails Okum & Whiting. Boats.
 Anchor Rope. For Salt Boat.
 Pitch Salt Boat.
 Repairs. Carpenter.
 Sold to Louise B.
 Sold to Y.



▲ Elise Hyman on the porch
 of her home in French Quarter.
 (Photo Mark Yokoyama)

◀ Top: A business ledger shows
 the costs of salt production:
 thread for salt bags, paint for
 boats and bags, and more.
 (Photo Mark Yokoyama) Bottom:
 Workers unload salt from flats in
 Grand Case. (Postcard courtesy
 of Barbara Cannegieter)



◀ Workers bag salt from a large pile of salt in Grand Case, similar to those created in Orient Bay. A ladder for climbing the pile can be seen on the left. (Postcard courtesy of Barbara Cannegieter)

▼ Left: A ledger records salt harvested in Orient Bay on August 29th, 1949. Right: The remains of salt pans in the Orient Bay salt pond can still be seen in the shallow water. (Photos Mark Yokoyama)

50.4. 1949

Salt reaped at Orient Bay

	Aug 29	Aug 30	Aug 31
Bryan Bryan	54	65	45
Salantine Blaseon	44	45	45
Joseph Fleming	23	26	44
Alex Burnley	21	25	24
Charles Vanderpool	26	30	16
Monette Jacobs	00	10	20
Relia Blake	00	10	8
Blake: 4 days at F	00	10	00
Burnley: 4 days	00	10	24
at carri	00	10	10



The boat used to be coming there every month. When it's time for the boat to come for it to take it up to Guadeloupe, then they ship it in the little bags. They bag it up, but they don't bag it before the boat come. It is when the boat come, they call, "The boat is here," the people, everybody, is going to work.

The people go and they bag it. They had a small bag. I don't know how much it used to be, but it was big enough for the children, because mostly children was going to do that. They put it on the head and they go and they had men by the seawater to take it from them, carry it to the boat. They take it from the children, carry it to the boat.

You carry bags on until the boat is loaded. They know how much the boat can carry. So that is how they do it. That's how they do the salt pond.

John Gumbs die. Victor Gumbs die. Everybody dead like that and the people die and went away and the salt pond went going down. You couldn't leave the salt pond. It had to be taken care of.

As long as rain falling, no salt don't grow. The rainy season, the fresh water melts it away. But when it come on the dry weather, up come the salt. Beautiful. There you get beautiful salt. It used to be a beautiful sight to see.

We Are Children of the Salt

In a 2016 interview, Tadzio Bervoets spoke about his relationship with the Great Salt Pond, both as the then-manager of the Nature Foundation St. Maarten, and as a St. Martinier.

When I was young, the Great Salt Pond was a lot different than what it is now. We're talking from when I can remember. I'm 34 now, so I guess about 28, 29 years ago. It was a lot larger, of course, it was a lot less polluted. Although at that time we already had the Philipsburg landfill, it was in no way as large and as out of control as it is now.

Even then, we still had our challenges. We had oftentimes that the dump caught fire and water quality issues, of course. But it was a lot cleaner than it is now. Throughout the years, the past two decades or so, we have seen a significant degradation of the wetland, definitely.

The most unique thing that I have done with work in the Great Salt Pond was last year in 2015 when we had the drought. I was actually able to walk across the Great Salt Pond, which is something that I've never done before. It was very interesting to see the different animals, whether it's snails or the carcasses of different fish that we find in the Great Salt Pond, different bird species. That was a very unique experience.

Of course, now since birding has developed a little more on St. Maarten, I also enjoy going out doing the bird counts, seeing what different birds, resident or migratory birds, we have on St. Maarten. Really my most significant memories are the ones that I've had recently working and trying to manage a wetland.

One of the most visually interesting stories that I hear often, kind of lamenting what the pond used to be, is from my mother. Certain times of year when it was drier or when there was more rainfall depending on what the circumstances were, the pond used to change colors significantly, so sometimes they would wake up in the morning with the sun rising in the East, the rays of the sun hitting the salt pond, it would be sometimes pink or it would be



▲ Left: Great Egrets and other pond birds gather on the salt pan walls in the Great Salt Pond. (Photo Mark Yokoyama) Right: Tadzio Bervoets, former Manager of the Nature Foundation St. Maarten. (Photo Ryan Tackling)

◀ Tadzio Bervoets surveys the Great Salt Pond during the drought of 2015. The remains of many kinds of fish, crab and snail were found on the dry pond bottom. (Photo Nature Foundation St. Maarten)



▲ Magnificent Frigatebirds can always be seen above the pond hunting for fish. (Photo Mark Yokoyama)

➤ Top: Brown Pelicans dry their feathers on a salt pan wall. Middle: The Great Salt Pond surrounded by development. Bottom: A young Killdeer explores its home on the shore of the Great Salt Pond. (Photos Mark Yokoyama)

deep red in color or be green or blue. Those are some of my favorite stories that I hear from the elders who grew up and saw the Great Salt Pond before it turned into, unfortunately, what it is now.

Not to sound overly dramatic, but today it breaks my heart to see something that is basically, for lack of a better term, the cradle of civilization on St. Maarten. My ancestors, my grandmother and my great-grandmother used to collect and pick the salt when it was still one of the main economic drivers of the economy of St. Maarten. It was the reason why the island was able to sustain itself before the tourism industry blossomed in the 1960s and '70s. To see the wetland degraded so significantly that, for example, our landfill is in the middle of the Great Salt Pond, it breaks my heart.

I really hope that moving forward, whatever the political climate may be or whoever the decision makers may be, that they take that into consideration and really look for a way to give the wetland the respect that it deserves, both in terms of its natural importance as a wetland, but also as a cultural heritage and call it cultural patrimony that we have here on the island.

The Great Salt Pond makes us what we are. We are still, as I've heard people say before, we are children of the salt. People have said that we are the salt of the earth because the Great Salt Pond. St. Maarten is St. Maarten because of the Great Salt Pond, it is one of the most important aspects of our cultural and national identity. St. Maarten exists because of the Great Salt Pond in a sense.

They Were Like Mysterious Sculptures

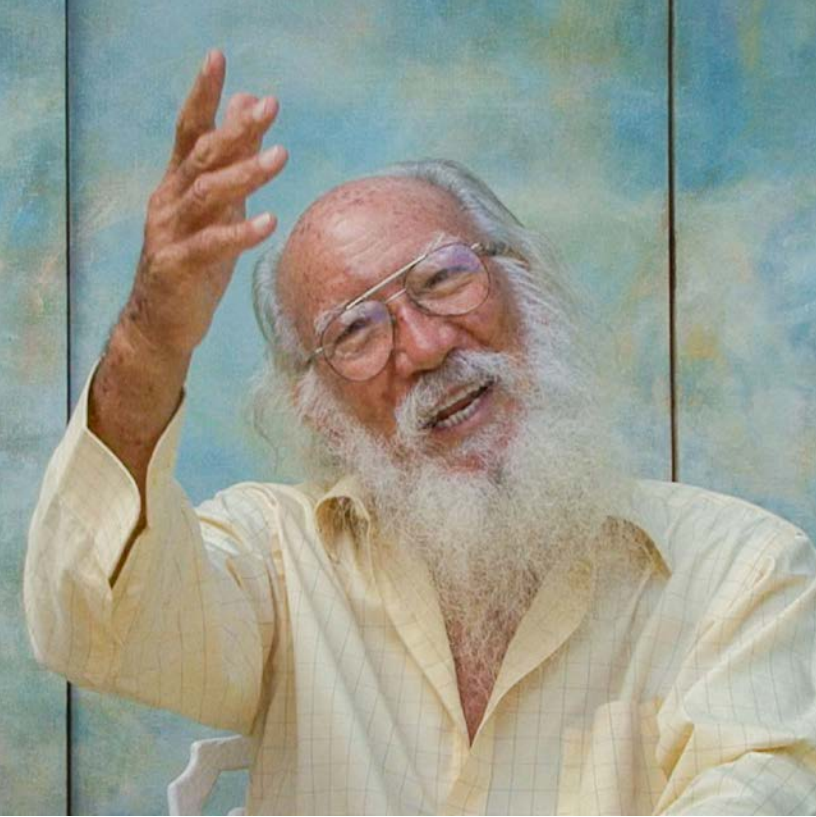
In a 2016 interview, painter Sir Roland Richardson recounted some of his memories of the Great Salt Pond and the salt-making process on St. Martin.

My memories of salt are visual, and also culinary. Visiting the Great Salt Pond was maybe the only one time of the year when at night I went to Philipsburg, because when the pond had shrimp, people would catch them. They would have what they call these bath pans — these tubs that they wash in — full of shrimp. There were also crabs and mullets. My father being one of the few that had a car, we would go over every once in a while, I think like once a year in my memory, and get these wonderful shrimp.

Otherwise, I always see the pond in a luminous way, where the white, gray, pink, greenish color were really always mysterious. The distinct impression of a mysterious quality of color that emanated from it, is where my memory is most solidly anchored.

The idea was actually just pure, simple nature. Allow sea water to flood the pond. Wait, let it evaporate, and as it evaporates, it causes concentration. That concentration settles, that settled concentration starts to build and becomes the salt bed. While it's going through those phases it goes through different colors, because there's both the refraction of the light in the crystals, but there's also whatever biological matter is in the pond.

The ponds also have these tiny, tiny reddish shrimp. These are living things and the effect that they go through with this evaporation process, cause colors. One time the pond would be completely pink, pink like cotton candy, sweet pink, beautiful. Then, there will be a greyishness that become more greenishness. Then it will start moving towards white, and the more you got less water, the more luminous and brilliant it was because it's all crystals.



▲ Left: A photo of the Great Salt Pond, turned a brilliant pink thanks to salt-tolerant microorganisms. On the far shore, gleaming white salt can be seen in the pans. (Photo Boy Lawson, Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen) Right: Roland Richardson shares some of his salt pond memories. (Photo Mark Yokoyama)

◀ Shrimp harvesting in Fresh Pond. On the shore, two men carry a washtub with their catch. (Unknown photographer)



▲ White salt fills the salt pans on the Great Salt Pond. (Postcard courtesy of Barbara Cannegieter)

► Workers break up salt from a huge mound and shovel it into bags before bringing it to a waiting ship. This photo dates from about 1915. The process was essentially the same 200 years earlier and 50 years later. (Unknown photographer)



The pond would be entered on foot and the workers would push what are called flats. These are flat-bottom boats that you pushed. The people pushing the barge would go with poles, you'd have to break the salt. Then, you have these big baskets, really roughly woven baskets made from mangrove. You would break the salt, which would be sitting on mud, very black, black mud, very strong-smelling mud. You would shake it, get the mud off, put it in the basket, shake it. When you got it clean, you would put it in the flat.

The flats were divided in three sections, one quarter on each end and a center section of one half. When you brought it in, your flat was worth X number of barrels without having to actually count them. Then it's unloaded, and then it's transported to a pile, and that pile could be...as a kid, it looked to me like it was as tall as any of the houses. Sometimes there'd be two of these things.

They were like mysterious sculptures because the salt pickers would walk up stairs or a ladder on the side of it with these baskets and then dump it, and then come down, up and down. This thing would grow and grow and grow.

Over time if the salt wasn't immediately used, it sat there for a long time, rain would come, it would start to melt. As it melted it would get smoother, and after a while it would take on a crust, and would be one lump of smooth, brilliant, very impressive, you could not not be impressed by it as you walked past it every time. Very mysterious.

The Birds Are Going in a Strange Direction

Hurricane Donna struck St. Martin on September 4th, 1960. It caused extensive damage and several deaths. Josianne Fleming-Artsen recounted her childhood memories of Hurricane Donna in an interview in 2019.

My name is Josianne Fleming-Artsen. I was born in Aruba because my parents went to Aruba for the Lago oil industry. At that time my father was moving around. Moved from Santo Domingo to Aruba and we were born there. Lago laid off the St. Martin people first who were working in Aruba and so we were to return to St. Martin in 1960.

That was the first time I flew on an airplane. I was maybe seven or eight years old, I think around that age. We came to St. Martin and we landed on this very simple airport. I think that was the first of August, around that time. The hurricane came a month later. That hurricane was Donna.

That was the first experience of us with the hurricane. In those days we had no phones and all of that and no weather reports. My father probably learned a lot when he was at Santo Domingo. He knew about the weather. He knew about birds. He knew about these things.

I remember him being in the garden and it was a very quiet day and there was no breeze; it was like the quiet before the storm and he said, "Something is going to happen." He was looking up, he said, "The birds are going in a strange direction." He said he's going to bar-up the house because he said we have to get ready for weather. That same night around twelve o'clock Hurricane Donna came and destroyed St. Martin.

I remember that night because I was my father's girl, so my daddy...anytime he was up I'm up too. I remember him trying to keep the windows down and the doors that were in between. I was like, "What is going on here?" When we got up the next morning, I remember seeing all the trees were like, no leaves, everything was like a war zone in St. Martin.

► *Josianne Fleming-Artsen at The Old House. (Video still by the oral history team)*





◀ A palm grows up out of the forest on a hill overlooking Colombier. (Photo Mark Yokoyama)

▼ A Sunday morning in Colombier, 1963. (Photo Gordon James)



I remember every morning, every day, the government brought us food, rations we called it at that time. A big truck would come and you would get water. You would get oil for cooking. You would get flour because flour was a good commodity. You could make your Johnny cakes and you could make bread. Those three things, I remember clearly that we received on a very regular basis.

Fast forwarding, all the repairs that were done were done with jollification. People would help each other repair their roofs, whatever needed to be done. It would be people coming together on a weekend, Saturday and Sunday, was to help each other. The owner of the house would then prepare a big pot of food and everybody would chip in and help. That has been going on since I know St. Martin.

Special thanks to the Les Fruits de Mer oral history team: Laura Bijnsdorp, Veronica Duzant, Charlie Gombis and Vida Hodge.

I See Her Come to Life on the Shutter

Lady Ruby Bute is a St. Martin painter and poet who has been called a national treasure and “the first dame of St. Martin’s cultural arts.” In 2018, she told the story of how she began a series of unique paintings in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma.

The day after Irma, I came up on my porch and look around, and miraculously, my house was intact. The garden, a few trees fell over, not much damage and the days that followed, the only refuge I could have found was to paint. I took out the easel. I set it back up. Since Irma, I have done quite some few beautiful works.

Now I’ll tell you what happened though. Something interesting happen. Irma destroyed homes that were never destroyed in decades. Some of them were those old traditional houses. There are homes that were built over a hundred years ago with the old traditional shutters. That hurricane’s strength ripped off most of those shutters and everything was piled in a big mountain of debris.

Here comes the special part. Let’s say when something bad happens, there is still another side of the coin. Here is my friend Alberto Philips who started to coin his ideas and went hunting into the debris of broken shattered homes. In what was piled up to be dumped, Alberto found treasures. The treasures were the old shutters from houses about 200 years old. The day he brought the shutters here to me, I was working on canvas on one of my masterpieces, I would say.

He walked in with an old shutter and he puts it in front of me. He say, “Ruby, this is a bright idea. We can paint on these shutters.” He said, “You can paint. I know you can make these shutters beautiful.” I laughed. I said, “Alberto, please go with that shutter.” I say, “It’s all dirty. I don’t want it here by me. I am painting on my canvas. Why should I paint on a shutter?” He said, “Try it. Try it.” I decided, “Well, okay, okay, if you say so.” The shutter was brushed, and washed, and cleaned, and dried.



▲ The artist and poet Ruby Bute. (Photo Ryan Tackling)

◀ Top: Traditional shutters. (Photo Mark Yokoyama)
Middle: Debris after Hurricane Irma. (Photo Mark Yokoyama)
Bottom: Detail of shutter with flowers by Ruby Bute. (Photo Stephanie Tihanyi)



◀ Ruby Bute painting a shutter at her home and studio in Friar's Bay. (Photo Stephanie Tihanyi)

▼ A woman in traditional dress and a woman carrying a basket of fruit to market, both painted on wooden shutters by Ruby Bute. (Photos Maria Gambale)

► Window shutter with floral painting by Ruby Bute. (Photo Stephanie Tihanyi)



As I got the shutter up on my easel, a light bulb went on, what should we call it? Inspiration? Or should we call it, I think, connection? Because when I saw the shutter on the easel, I then put myself in the place of the persons living there about 100 years ago, 150 years ago. I became close to the — it's the spiritual part now — of those that lived there, those that carried on their lives there. I saw them on the shutter. I said, "You know what, Alberto? I'll paint the people who lived there back in that era."

The shutter became most beautiful ladies carrying baskets on their head with their wares and their fruits and the fish, just the way it was at St. Martin back then. The cultural living, the market woman who is toiling and who's taken her bananas, her fish, she's walking through the hills to sell her wares. I saw them. I'm having goosebumps as I speak. I saw the spirits of all those people and I started to paint. I just fashioned their faces.

In that, came beautiful people unknown to me. I don't know them but my brush brought them forward. Beautiful women, the old traditional dresses, the frills, the petticoat, the head ties. I would finish it off with a fine dash of my finest brush, the earrings. I see her come to life on the shutter, walking through the hills, going from the French side on foot, to the Dutch side to sell the bananas, the pumpkin, the mangoes, the limes. She would be calling out as she reach into town, she would be saying, "Come get your bananas. Come get you mangoes." I saw the life of then and I'm working on that now. I am in a close contact as a painter with the beautiful past that was St. Martin.



Huber
66

You Get a Feeling of Love

Christmas House is one of St. Martin's most popular and unique attractions. It is a tradition that goes back over 30 years and has touched many thousands of lives. It all started as something simple. Bernadine Arnell Joe decorated her own home, and it became a place for family and friends to enjoy the holiday spirit. In a 2018 interview, she shared the story of Christmas House.

We started from scratch. We made a little tree and the neighbors would come and the children would come and then it start growing. Then you start putting it outside and then people start coming and now it's very popular. It just happened, then people come in and you get a feeling of love, you share love.

I wanted it to be simple, no fee-charging and so on. At a certain time it gets so popular, that the amount that people comes, and I like to have cake and different things. Once a lady came and she said, "Why don't you put a basket let people put a little donation or something?" Thanks to whoever she was, because I didn't know her. From that day that basket has never been empty. It always provide enough to buy the cake, buy the rum and make the punch.

It's the spirit of Christmas. Like I said, God always provide. Sometimes, if you ask me how you getting by with it, it's very expensive, but then God always provide. Like this year, people bring Christmas tree, they bring lights and it helps. It motivates you because the love you get from the people, the feeling that you get, it could be motivating.

When I look out the morning after [Hurricane Irma], I decide well, this is it, because all our stuff was put outside here, messed up. So, I said, "Well, this year we really can't get by this year," but then, with our spirit, we've got to fight.

You know little child come around and say, "Miss, Santa Claus est mort, meaning Christmas is dead." I say, "No, it ain't dead yet, we've got to resurrect him."



▲ Bernadine Arnell Joe, known to generations of St. Martin people as Mama Noël. (Photo Mark Yokoyama)

◀ Christmas House has room after room of sparkling lights and kaleidoscopic decorations. It is a winter wonderland like no other. (Photo Mark Yokoyama)



▲ *Bright lights welcome visitors to Christmas House from November to January each year. Visiting is always free for all. (Photo Mark Yokoyama)*

➤ *Christmas themes and local traditions come together at Christmas House. Here, Christmas present decorations sit side by side with a doliprane plant, used in Caribbean plant medicine. (Photo Mark Yokoyama)*



There was a Santa standing up on the roof there, looking like he look at the street and I said, “This is a sign.” Then we had some flowers that stay up from garlands from last year. And they stayed there. I said, “But with all this destruction and these things stay there, we have to do something.” With that spirit we did something.

It makes you feel good, like when people come and see that they pass and say, “We ain’t gonna have no Christmas this year.” Then they see the lights. And the joy from that, it gives you a nice feeling. Just the joy and love. You see the joy at meeting people, it makes you feel that you did something. Nothing can prepare you for the feeling of sharing.

When people come here, it’s like a family. We have people come for years. I have people come bring their children, then the children bring their children and then they will tell you, “I was coming here from since I was a child and now I bring my child.” It come like a knit family. A love that you can’t explain.

I had big people come here and cry. They tell me they feel some kind of a joy, maybe a spiritual joy. It makes you feel good that you could do that. To me, that is like giving to my country, to my family. Wherever I go now, people will say, “Christmas lady.” It brings so much joy.

I want if I pass tomorrow, God forbid, that it continue. Just leave the house to be the Christmas House and I think that will be a nice feeling. I hope that the kids will go on.

Twenty-nine Days

Thirty-five years ago the Reverend Marcel Eugene Hodge opened the Les Alizés Guest House in Grand Case. This is the story of how he envisioned, built and opened the guest house, in his own words.

While I was working construction with Le Galion, chez Bernard — great man. He was so great. His money was not big in those days, but it was constant. He would never owe you one franc. So, I see he would come up on the job every day. Nine o'clock he come up. By eleven o'clock, he's going back home because he got to go back to Marigot to be there to eat with his wife and children.

So, I said to the workers, "Look at this. This man only spends two hours up here. We are running the work. I'm doing the maintenance, we got other men there with us, the ladies are running it, this young man is the manager. Why can't we get together and get a piece of land by the beach and make a small hotel?"

Well, they thought it was the craziest thing. They say, "Man, Hodge, we know you're intelligent, we know you're smart, but this is the foolishhest thing I hear you say. How you gonna do that?"

It keep dawning on me, yes it could be done. So, when I came to the idea, I started the guest house here in '82, '83. I started to build here. Money was so flourishing in my pocket that to build three rooms, it take me three years.

But by 1985, the 25th of October, we opened up with three rooms. Nobody in the village gave me credit for doing it. They said, "Why don't you take that and just rent them out by the month?" You could get \$25 for a room, you know, so it would have been a month, I probably have \$75. But I said "No, this is a guest house." And they laugh at me. Some feel sorry for me.

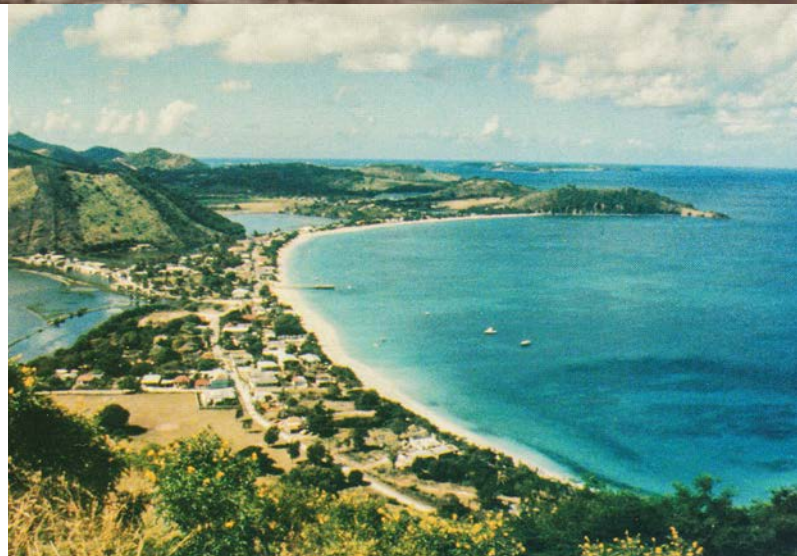
► Reverend Marcel Eugene Hodge at Les Alizés in Grand Case. (Photo Mark Yokoyama)





▲ *The Les Alizés Guest House as seen from the water in Grand Case Bay in 1989. (Photo Christian Descouens)*

➤ *Grand Case in 1981. (Photo Edward P. White)*



One of the big men in Grand Case I really looked up to as the lawyer, the advisor, was the late Mr. Emile Tackling. He was our all-in-all, the one we looked to advice, for instruction. He said, “Son, I know you’re ambitious, but don’t work with that. That gonna be too difficult for you. Leave that to the big boys that can handle that, like your boss Bernard. Just you rent them by the month.” And I said, “No, Mr. Tackling.” We used to call him Pops. “No, Pops. I want to do this guest house.”

When I opened it, one day, nobody come. Just got a sign by the road: Les Alizés Guest House. Ten days, nobody come. Twenty days, nobody come. Twenty-five days, nobody come. And every afternoon friends would come up. Some would sympathize with me, some to laugh at me, “Hey preacher, what about the guest house, man? She full? She ain’t full yet?” I said, “No, not yet, they ain’t come yet.”

And when we get 29 days, a couple passed through here on a Volkswagen. They were overnighing in Philipsburg and they were going on a three-mast sailing boat somewhere in the Caribbean. They came because, they said, “This is a fishing town and we wanted to stay here for the night, and we saw the sign and we came.”

And they said, “How much a night?” And I said, “25 US dollars per night for the one room.” Don’t ask me how big I was. I felt so big, so important. After three years of building, now I’m getting my first \$25.

After they left, we started to get one, two people come in. Sometimes all three rooms went, sometimes one, sometimes two. But, up to when Irma came three years ago, twelve months a year, we were never empty for six nights. The most we stayed without guests would be five nights. But the sixth night, for sure we got guests.

► *A multi-lingual message of thanks is hand-painted above the entrance to Les Alizés. (Photo Mark Yokoyama)*



I'm from the Renaissance

In an interview in 2018, at the foot of Sentry Hill, Cynric Griffith told the story of the first time he met the Queen of the Netherlands and other stories of his career as an artist and teacher.

My name is Cynric Griffith. I was born on the island of St. Kitts, the first of January, 1919. I came to St. Martin in 1956 and from then on, many other things has been happening.

I'm a portrait painter now, I paint landscapes. I'm from the Renaissance, the days of Rembrandt. I'm still painting. Not actually painting, but doing pen and ink drawings and so on, you know. Well it seem to me that every subject matter that I work on, it's a part of me, you know? I have no choice, I can pick up my brush and my palette and start working with oil paint. The next time I could get the pen and ink, next time watercolor.

When I was at the Pasangrahan Hotel, my boss told me that "The Queen is coming!" And she was staying at Little Bay Hotel. He said, "I need you to help, and serve her, and you has to have a white coat, and a black tie and a black pants."

Mr. Wathey [the island Commissioner at the time], he came to me one day and said, "You know, the Queen is coming here, and what you're going to do, you're going up into the hill and you're going to paint a picture of the area where the Queen is going to cut the ribbon for the new airport."

So I did that, and when the Queen came, I was asked to serve her coffee. Mr. Wathey gave me the painting to deliver to the Queen, I think that was a couple hours after I gave her coffee. And she looked up at me and said, "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" I said, "Yes, I served you coffee!" And this was the way it went. From that day on, they always, when she's coming, invite me to receptions and so on.



▲ Cynric Griffith shares stories from his life in 2018. (Photo Mark Yokoyama)

◀ Top: Cynric Griffith flips through a notebook of recent sketches. Bottom: Griffith shows works in progress. (Photos Mark Yokoyama)



▲ Left: Griffith painted many striking portraits of local people from all walks of life. Right: Cynric Griffith attends an art event. (Photo House of Nehesi Publishers)

► Left: Griffith often painted people at work. Middle: Cynric Griffith in 2001 with a sketched self-portrait in the background. (Photo Jabiru Jomal) Right: Griffith's landscapes often featured traditional houses and the Flamboyant tree.



I got a call from the St. Maarten Academy, this new college. They said, “Would you like to teach?” I said, “Yes.” So I went into it and I taught there for nine years.

And there was no shop, no store that sells anything like [art supplies], so I brought a stock of materials. The school did not have any paper and things to work with, so I gave it to them all. I would bring them all up here in this very place, all up in the hills. We used to walk it all the way up and look around and paint all the houses, anything that we can see.

Today, I get some surprises. When I’m sometimes sitting outside on the porch, I hear a voice, “Is that Mr. Griffith?” So I look up and say, “Yes, who are you?” “Don’t you remember? You use to teach us and take us all up in the hills to draw.” You know, it makes you feel good. I have achieved something, I have given something. And it goes on like that from day to day.



I Found a Box: 1848

Alfonso Blijden has worked with St. Maarten's archives since 1987. In a 2021 interview, he tells how he got started, discoveries he made and how he brought international recognition to local heritage.

My academic background is really accounting. I have my degree in accounting. I came to St. Maarten in 1985. I worked at the Bank of Nova Scotia where I thought I found my dream job because it was figures. Everything numbers was what intrigued me. In '87, I decided to leave the bank and to work in government. There is where my passion and love for history, culture, and anything that has to do with that was sparked by my former boss Mr. Duzanson.

I had no knowledge of archives whatsoever. It was strange how it started because just one day a gentleman walked into the bank and said, "Hey, I heard you want to leave the bank." I said, "You heard I want to leave the bank?" It was true, but I never told anyone. I'm like, "Yes." He said, "I think I've got a job for you. I need you to write me an application letter." I said, "I'll get it to you." He said, "No, I want it now." He pulled out a writing pad and he gave me a paper and said, "I need an application from you now." I was like, "I can't just write. I have to sit down and think. What am I applying for?"

He said, "Just write that you're applying for a job at General Affairs." I wrote a four-, five-line letter, signed it, gave it to him. In my mind, I thought, "I'll never see you again." He left. A few weeks later I went on vacation to New York, came back on the 15th of December. That was in 1986. On the same day I came back, I met him. He said, "Hey, you are starting next week. I was looking for you."

I said, "Next week?" I said, "No, you can't do that. I need to give notice." He said, "How much time do you need?" I said, "I need at least two weeks to give them notice." He said, "Okay, good, then you start on the first working day of the new year." I'm like, "Wow." The following day, I went in, gave my notice. On January 2nd, 1987, on my birthday, I started, not really knowing what I was going to be doing or encounter. I just started.

► *Alfonso Blijden. (Photo Ryan Tackling)*



When I started, it was strictly administrative work, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. Then, one day, my boss gave me a key and he sent me down to what we call our historical archive or old archive. I went down to just one big dark room, no windows, anything, and just stuffed boxes. I went round, walked around, and never really paying attention to what was all in there.

I went to the archives and I started walking around. I saw a box in the corner and in the top shelf saying 1837. I asked myself, “Is that the number of the box or is that a year?” I climbed up and opened the box. From the time I saw the documents, I knew it had to be a year. At that time, even up to now, I am still into this whole slavery business. Suddenly I was like, “Okay, abolition of slavery.” I started looking. I found a box: 1848. Believe it or not, I took out the book, opened the book. I don’t read French, but the first two words I saw it’s in French: Abolition de l’esclavage. I was like, “Whoa. Okay.”

I closed the book, ran from the archives, went to Mr. Duzanson, and said, “Mr. Duzanson, you know what I just found?” Then I told him. He said, “What are you going to do about them?” I said, “I don’t know. I just came to you.” He said, “No.” He said, “You are in charge now. You do what has to be done.”

Even on Saturdays, I would go inside and try to transcribe something. I was mostly focusing back then on Diamond 26 Escape, because that was one of the first documents I found. I was mostly focusing on trying to transcribe that document.

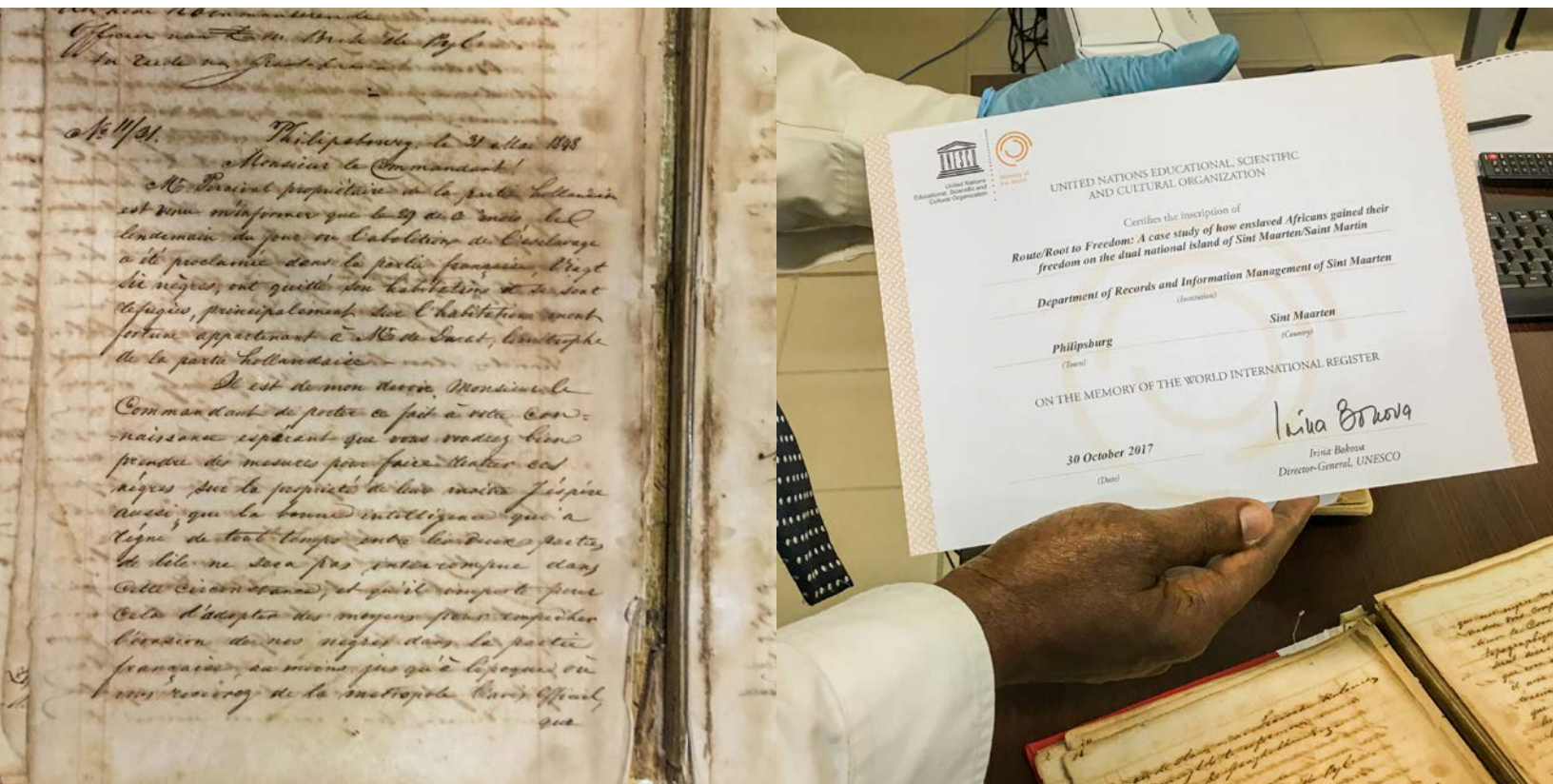
Then I realized that “Alfonso, you don’t know half of what you have.” I was using Google Translate. I will sit down. I will look at a word in French. I will check and type what I think I saw and that way translate the whole letter in English. Sometimes it didn’t make sense. I would have to go over it again and change a word here, change a letter there. Eventually, I got an idea what they were trying to say in those letters.

I started out on as St. Maarten’s representative under NAAM, which is the National Anthropological, Archeological Memory Management. Then from there, I moved on to being a vice president of the Memory of the World for Latin America and the Caribbean. That’s part

of UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization]. What we would do is every year there was a call for nominations. All the countries that fall within Latin America and the Caribbean, they would actually send in documents that they would like to nominate and put on the regional or international heritage register.

St. Maarten has documents in two registers right now, one on the international and one on the regional. The one on the international is the Diamond Estate Escape. The one on the regional is slave records and documents concerning slavery in Curaçao, St. Maarten, and Suriname. We tied all of them in together. We made one joint nomination, and it was accepted. To make it on, it's an honor. It's a privilege.

✓ Left: A letter from May 31, 1848 from the commander in Philipsburg to his counterpart in Marigot requests the return of the Diamond 26. Right: A document certifying the inclusion of “Route/Root to Freedom” case study about the Diamond Estate Escape on the Memory of the World International Register. (Photos Mark Yokoyama)



We Used to Eat Fresh Things

Many people who grew up on St. Martin before the tourism era remember hard times. The search for work abroad separated many families. At home, it often took hard work and resourcefulness to make ends meet. In an interview in 2018, Delphine David shared some of her memories.

My name is Delphine David, born the 11th of October, 1940 on St. Martin. My mother taught us to cook from young, and secondly, my father was in Aruba. So my mother had to be the father and mother. So when she go out to make a dollar, I had to stay home and mind the other brothers and sister. Many days I couldn't go to school 'cause I had to stay home with them.

I used to make johnny cake, fry up johnny cake, with them, with the bush tea. My favorite thing was fish and dumpling. And fried chicken, I had to kill the chicken and then cook it. So, we used to eat fresh things in those days. It's not like now, you go in the shop and buy a box of chicken. No, I had to go out there and catch a fowl, clean it, season it and cook it for them.

When I was growing up, things were so bad with my mother that she will buy a bag of flour, a big bag of flour. And where she throw the flour, I don't know. But she used to take the bag, the flour bag, wash it good, put it in the sun, let the sun draw out the marks. She used to crochet, so she will take that bag, measure us, and crochet right around, fix our waist, tie our waist with a string, and that was our outfit.

Sometimes we'd go on a beach, celebrate parties on the beach. The music box in the tree. And a barbecue grill, we was barbecuing chicken, spare ribs. And we had a coal pot cooking rice, rice and peas. We left home with everything raw and when we reach there, we cook it.

Living as a single mother alone with two kids, all I can remember is that I worked very hard. But after I raised my two kids, send them on to scholarship, they're my happy life. Never had no one to worry about.



▲ *Delphine David recounted her life story in an interview in 2018 at the White and Yellow Cross. (Photo Mark Yokoyama)*

◀ *Traditional cooking on a coal pot as painted by Ruby Bute. (Painting by Ruby Bute)*

The Serenaders

Local poet and entrepreneur Tamara Groenveldt shared some of her favorite St. Martin Christmas traditions in an interview in 2019.

Every family would do their potato pudding and on Christmas day they would visit different families and of course you would be exchanging foods. And of course, coconut tarts, guavaberry tarts, that's a very big one at Christmas time.

We have sorrel, I like the juice, I'm not a big drinker. We have lime punch as well. We also have guavaberry punch. That's a staple at Christmas time. Every family has a bottle in their house. And everyone usually knew how to make their own guavaberry rum as well. You would usually get the guavaberry and you put it to soak for at least a year. And then that would be what you would serve the serenaders when they would come by at four o'clock or whatever time in the morning.

So we still have serenading happening in Grand Case. We have a group of people who have decided to preserve that part of our history and they would go and they would serenade every year. It is important to me because growing up, I remember serenaders coming to your home. And it would be persons like Tanny and the Boys that were playing string band music. So they would come with like, the bath pan and the triangle, the grater with the Afro pick. And they would be playing this traditional music.

They would usually sing something along the lines of "Open the door because the dew is falling on us." So they would call your name, they would say "Charlie, open the door, open the door, for the dew is falling on us." And so then you would have to get up at three to four in the morning, whatever time it was, and you would open your door and you should always have something prepared to give to the serenaders.



▲ *Tamara Groenveldt recounts local Christmas traditions. (Photo Les Fruits de Mer)*

◀ *Top: Traditional Christmas tarts baked by Tamara Groenveldt. Bottom: Sweet potato pudding is another local Christmas favorite. (Photos Tamara Groenveldt/St. Martin's Sweetness)*



▲ Serenaders sing traditional Christmas songs at the Guavaberry Festival in 2019 in the village of Colombier. (Photo Alfonso Blijden)

➤ Extravagant costumes and floats are part of the annual Grand Case Christmas Parade. (Photo William Moore)



So they would want the bush tea, or they would want the guavaberry rum. If you have the potato pudding. And every household that they visit, you have to have something to offer the serenaders, 'cause they're coming and they're playing for you. They're out on your porch and they're just playin' all this music: "Mama make your johnny cakes, Christmas comin'!" It was amazing.

Because those persons in Grand Case still do it to keep tradition alive, it really helps me to feel the Christmas spirit. And I feel like when, some years ago, when there were all types of laws that came into being to regulate serenaders, I think that's what actually helped our tradition of serenading to go down the drain. Because what happened was, according to how I understand it, persons who came to live on the island, who were not familiar with serenading, they started calling the gendarmes and the police and saying that these persons are disturbing us when we are trying to sleep.

Now traditionally, it is St. Martin tradition for you to come in those wee hours in the morning to serenade your friends and family and neighbors with beautiful St. Martin music. Now those persons who actually put the complaints in, they do not understand who we are as a people or what we do as a people. And by putting those laws and regulations in place, telling persons that, okay, you need to now get a permit to serenade, you know a lot of the locals felt like, "Why do I need to get a permit to serenade? I've been doing this for many years. It has never been a problem. This is who we are. I'm just not going to do it."

So they refused to do it and that was what, in my opinion, helped the serenading part of our tradition to go down the drain. So kudos to the persons who are actually trying to revive it and keep it alive so that the younger generation can come in and know, or at least feel what it felt like to be serenaded by your neighbors or family or persons even coming from the other side of the island, the southern side of the island, to play music for family and friends at Christmas time.

Special thanks to the Les Fruits de Mer oral history team: Laura Bijnsdorp, Veronica Duzant, Charlie Gombis and Vida Hodge.

The Conch Shell

Communication on St. Martin was different back when Raymond “Big Ray” Helligar was growing up in Colombier. He shared his memories in an interview in 2019.

You get news from the radio when you have a radio. I would tell you, for instance, when there was a boxing match like Joe Louis and Walcott and those big world champions, we used to listen to the fight, but on the radio. So in our village, we had two radios and from the day people would line up around the house to listen to this boxing match. And to me, those boxing matches were more interesting than now on TV, honestly, because you use more imagination and you would count blow for blow.

There was news and all different events would come by radio or they used to have telegrams. They would teletype, you know the thing tick tick tick and the guy would translate it and they send it. When somebody die they get a telegram come in that such and such a person die. They didn't have cellular.

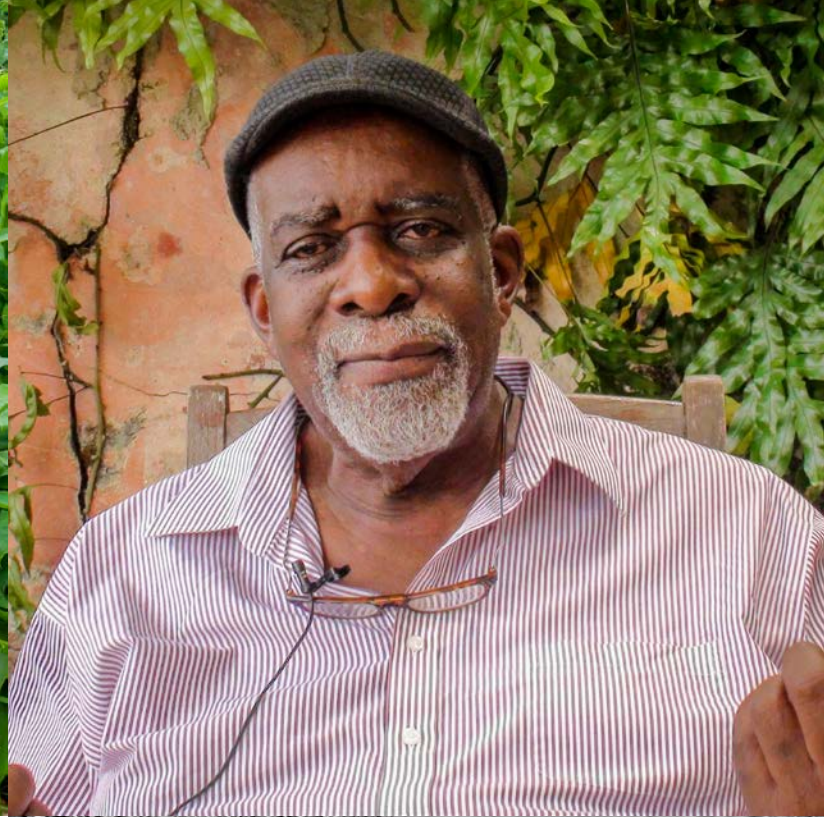
Communication locally, some places they used the drum but the entrance of communication was the conch shell. Actually, I have a chat they call the Conch Shell, and the reason I use that is because the conch shell was a symbol of communication. When you go and the fisherman come ashore and they have jack, they would blow the conch shell. “Bup-bu-da-dup-bu-da-dup!” They would say, “10 jacks for a bit, 10 jacks for a bit” or whatever.

My father, we used to butcher from time to time and when we butcher, have the meat we blow the shell. The people will come around, “Hey, here they have meat selling.”

My village is an agricultural village. In Colombier, up until recently, they used to do Arrowroot Jollification. It would be when they start to open up the crop and they start digging, they would announce it with the conch shell. When the crop is over too, they would announce on the conch shell.

► *Raymond Helligar. (Photo Ryan Tackling)*





▲ Left: A field of arrowroot growing in the town of Colombier. (Photo Mark Yokoyama) Right: Raymond “Big Ray” Helligar tells interviewers about the conch shell and other traditions from his home town, Colombier. (Photo Les Fruits de Mer)

➤ Decades ago, a family processes arrowroot in St. Martin. On the left, a child pounds the root in a traditional mortar. On the right, a woman separates the fiber from the starch. (Photo courtesy of Alfonso Blijden)



Then they had various pong* yard they would refer to them. The mortar and the pestle. So they had different pong yard which they dig, they wash and they would pound. When that pong yard complete pongin' they would blow the shell announce, "Okay, the Gibbs had a pong yard and he finished." A couple of hours after or maybe the following day you will hear the shell blow down by the Baly's, by a lady by the entrance, called Ya-ya.

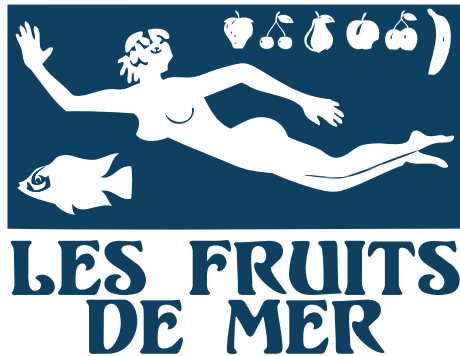
Then they had another pong yard by Miss Christine, Christine Coakley. This lady, she was famous. I don't think in our days we look at her, we didn't have a lot of people in St. Martin at the time, but if someone died she wouldn't miss a funeral. I guess she knew everybody then. You see she's dressed in a black dress, and she would put her cowrie shoes in our hand because the roads were not paved so she didn't want to mess up her shoes. She would go barefooted and walk with a bottle of water and wash her feet and put the shoes on to go to the funeral. Those are things as a child you'll always remember.

Special thanks to the Les Fruits de Mer oral history team: Laura Bijnsdorp, Veronica Duzant, Charlie Gombis and Vida Hodge.

** Pong is a way of saying pound in St. Martin English. Arrowroot is pounded in large mortars to separate the fiber from the starch.*

This book was developed as a companion to Amuseum Naturalis, St. Martin's free museum of nature and heritage. The Amuseum, and this book, were created by Les Fruits de Mer. Special thanks to Maria Gambale for her generous instruction in the craft of documentary filmmaking, interviewing and recording, and for her interview with Lady Ruby Bute. Special thanks also to the Les Fruits de Mer oral history team: Laura Bijnsdorp, Veronica Duzant, Charlie Gombis and Vida Hodge, and particularly to Laura Bijnsdorp for teaching interview and recording techniques to the team.

Les Fruits de Mer is a non-profit association based in St. Martin. Their core mission is to collect and share knowledge about local nature and heritage. They carry out this mission through books and other publications, their free museum, short films and oral histories, events and other projects. Discover more and download free resources at lesfruitsdemer.com.



Produced with the support of • Réalisé avec le soutien de :





Stories of St. Martin

In this book, twelve St. Martiners tell stories from their lives in their own words. Each story captures a unique part of life on St. Martin, and each story captures a unique voice. They are stories of work, hardship, accomplishment and inspiration.

These stories were recorded on St. Martin between 2016 and 2021. They tell us about salt and salt harvesting, storms and renewal, work and service, and local traditions. Each one is part of an oral history tradition on St. Martin that stretches back hundreds of years, and continues today.

If you know someone with a story to share, record it today!
Or visit lesfruitsdemer.com and send us a message, so we can record it together.

