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## The Coffin Maker of St Eustatius

Chester J. Kulesa

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THE COFFINMAKER OF ST. EUSTATIUS

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Anthropology  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

Chester J. Kulesa

1989

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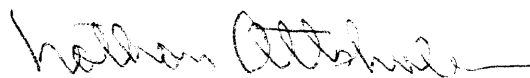
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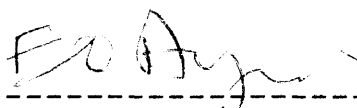


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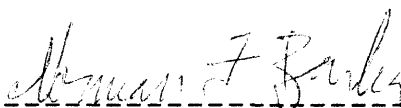
Approved, September 1989



Nathan Altshuler



Eric O. Ayisi



Norman F. Barka

## DEDICATION

This Thesis is dedicated to Mr. Henry Elridge Timber--my teacher  
and my friend.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to document the life history of the coffinmaker of St. Eustatius, Netherlands Antilles, detail an example of coffin construction, and explain and analyze coffin typology with respect to St. Eustatian society. All fieldwork was conducted through oral-history study, participant-observation, and ethnoarchaeology in the Summer of 1985.

The portions of the thesis that focus on the life history of the coffinmaker, Henry Elridge Timber, include research on his youth and adult years in the context of family, work, and community on St. Eustatius. Additionally, research is presented to explain the role of the coffinmaker on the island today, and in the past, and how the knowledge of the trade is disseminated through generations.

Coffin construction is exemplified through the documentation of one coffin type. Both wooden construction and cloth covering of the coffin are explained and illustrated in detail.

The last chapter of this thesis explains the types of coffins constructed by Mr. Timber throughout his life. Coffin types are defined by their attributes and their origins are explained. The results of the research conducted in fieldwork suggests that coffin typology on St. Eustatius can be linked with the area and direction of economic change affecting the society from about 1863 to 1985.

THE COFFINMAKER OF ST. EUSTATIUS

## INTRODUCTION

The content of this thesis is composed of the life history of the coffinmaker of St. Eustatius, documentation of an example of coffin construction, and an analysis of coffin types in building theory that they are related to the area and direction of economic change associated with the history of St. Eustatius society. Thus, the main source of information for this work is Henry Elridge Timber, coffinmaker of St. Eustatius, the informant for this ethnographic study. My approach to gathering information, in this manner, for my thesis, is fundamental to the discipline of anthropology:

Informant interviews are a main source of data for anthropology. Evaluation and analysis of such data, including theory construction and testing, constitute a vital part of the research activity of the profession.[1]

Mr. Timber has been selected as the informant for all interviews because he is a craftsman trained in the traditional methods of coffin construction, the only surviving member of this particular way of learning, and the best informant on the island to explain coffin construction and typology with respect to St. Eustatius society:

Clearly we cannot study all of culture but rather we must have a strategy for sampling smaller, coherent segments of the total information pool constituting culture. We also need to make a provision for the possible

---

[1]A. Kimball Romney, Susan C. Weller, and William H. Batchelder, "Culture as Consensus: A Theory of Culture and Informant Accuracy," American Anthropologist 88 (June 1986): 314.

unequal distributions of knowledge among "experts" or specialists and nonspecialists in a society.[2]

Focusing on the craftsman as informant in gathering, analyzing, and reporting data, is important not only because he may be the sole member of the society who retains such information[3], but because documentary sources may be inadequate in explaining and presenting the lifeways and products of craftsmen.[4] Furthermore, the lack of life history studies of craftsmen often presents archaeology as the only approach in which to study the products of craftsmen.[5] Therefore, in this context, this ethnographic study is relevant to archaeology. Archaeology not only benefits from a study of the lives and ways of craftsmen, but, in turn, can test the information presented in such an ethnography or ethnohistory.[6]

Archaeology can benefit from informant interviews of craftsmen because such studies give information on construction methods, the origin, attributes, and distribution of the types of products constructed and how these products relate to the history and culture

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[2]Ibid.

[3]Margaret E. Leshikar, "Construction of a Dugout Canoe in the Parish of St. Ann, Jamaica," Proceedings of the Sixteenth Conference on Underwater Archaeology 4 (1985):48.

[4]Robert B. Gordon, "Who Turned the Mechanical Ideal into Mechanical Reality?," Technology and Culture 29 (October 1988):748.

[5]Lester A. Ross, "16th-Century Spanish Basque Coopering," Historical Archaeology 19 (1985):30.

[6]James Deetz, Invitation to Archaeology (Garden City: The Natural History Press, 1967), pp. 32-33.

of the society.[7] This is because, in the absence of historical documentation, the use of analogy is often critical to archaeological reasoning:

...in nearly every interpretation he makes of the past, the archaeologist has to draw on knowledge of his own or other contemporary societies in order to clothe the skeleton remains from the past...[8]

The biography of Mr. Timber as the coffinmaker of St. Eustatius is not meant by any means to be an ethnography of the culture and history of the people of St. Eustatius. Rather, it is a human document that centers on the "day to day with which life everywhere is so largely concerned." [9]

Such an approach is essential in establishing the body of information that forms the content of this thesis as described. Edward Sapir notes the importance of this methodology in Dyk's work, Son Of Old Man Hat: "It is a sequence of memories that need an extraordinary well-defined personality to hold them together, yet nowhere is this unique consciousness obtruded upon us." [10]

Thus, the product of this type of study is of universal appeal for the peoples of all cultures:

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[7]Hetty Jo Brumbach, "The Recent Fur Trade in Northwestern Saskatchewan," Historical Archaeology 19 (1985):19-39.

[8]Ian Hodder, The Present Past (New York: Pica Press, 1982), p. 12.

[9]Walter Dyk, Son Of Old Man Hat (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), p. xi.

[10]Ibid., p. viii.

And so the Son Of Old Man Hat, not by hinting at human likeness or difference but through the sheer clarity of his daily experiences, resolves all cultural and personal conflicts and reminds us that human life is priceless, not because of the glories of the past nor the hopes of the future, but because of the irrevocable trivialities of a present that is always slipping away from us.[11]

It is in the tradition of the body of this scholarship that this thesis is presented.

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[11]Op. cit., p. ix.

## CHAPTER I

### THE YOUTH AND DEVELOPMENTAL YEARS OF HENRY ELDRIDGE TIMBER, 1914-33

Henry Elridge Timber was born as the first child to Rebecca and John Joseph Timber on November 27, 1914:

I lived in the north part of the island. I was born over there. I live over there. When I was nine years old we left over there and I came over here to live. Then my father bought the piece of property. He paid down so much on it and then, when he went to the United States, he paid the balance. We had our own land then. That's right down below here. That's where my sisters live now.[12]

In thinking about his youth, Elridge recalls best how the physical environment of the island has changed:

A lot of bush along these roads. Plenty bush. The roads weren't as wide as they is today with a thing we call callerflow, it made like sisal-prickley-prickle hedges-long thorns-all around. We did have no fruit trees. The fruit trees or anything used to mostly grow up on the mountain-wild-only here these last years now they plant those mango trees and banana trees and stone and so on--and quava trees. There was nothing but kinnup trees! Yes, that's all of that you will see here. The people used to take care of it, that kinnup tree. Well, there was nothin' but bush. All over the place, bush.[13]

Thus, it is important to note here that the roads of Elridge's youth were narrow, only about four feet wide. "Yes, just a path to go along. This (the Bredeweg) was all the time that way. The wall was just from olden times--this stone wall." [14]

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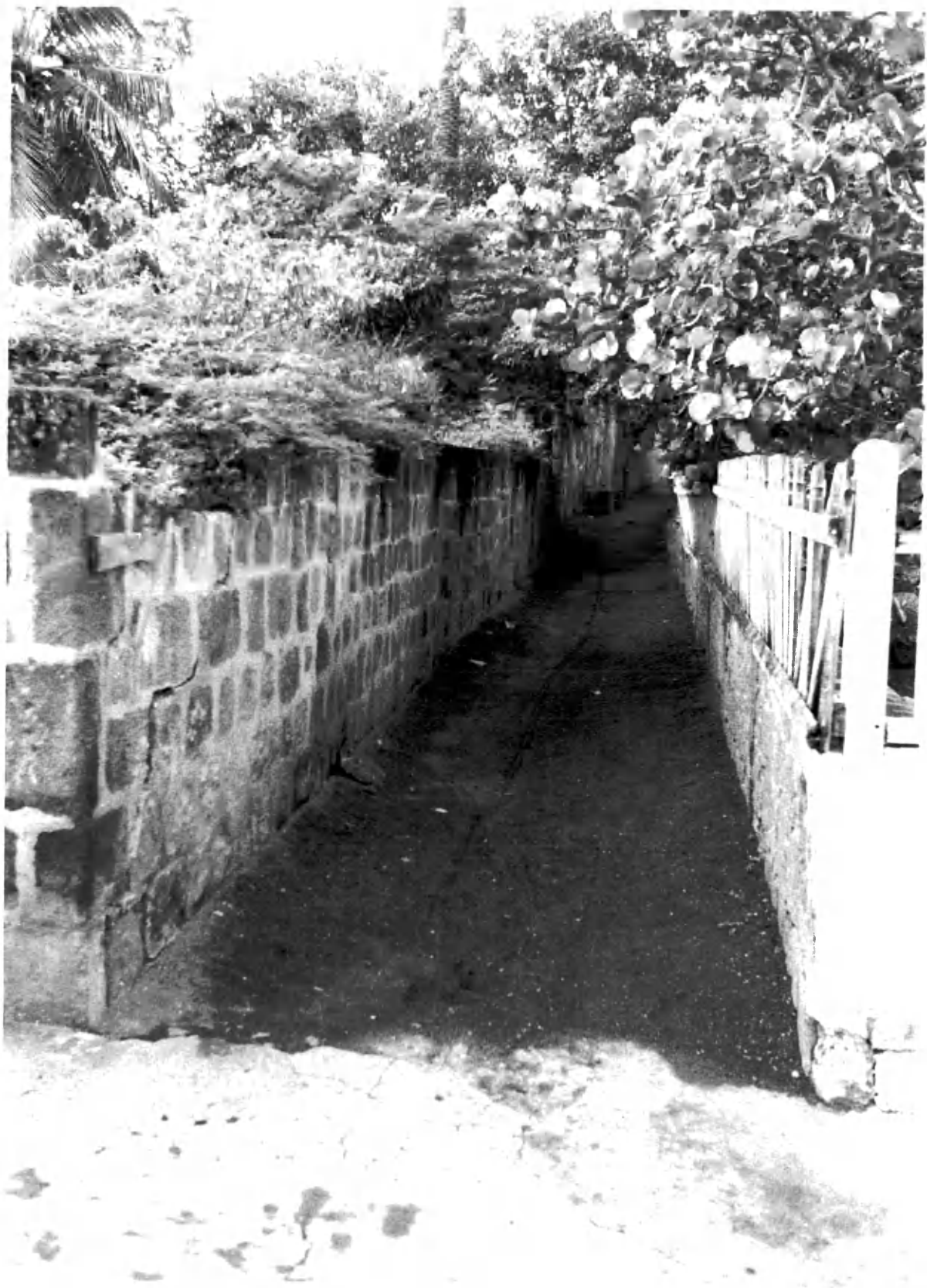
[12]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 26 June 1985.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.







Donkey carts. That's all they had--just two wheels. The old slave holders had a thing they call a buggy with four wheels, but that was for the big slave masters. The horse pull it. But the poor man, all he had was a donkey cart. Not me, I didn't have no donkey cart. The old farmers did. Some did, but not all. And we thought we had a treasure when we had that. The roads were all dirt and they were not wide at all. Prickles all on the side and when they came. The government had went on the road they had just to take a weed right there and a weed right there. When they all started, when cars come, they (the government) buy land from people--takin' land from people.[15]

The people were very poor. They plant a little ground and then along with the ground, they keep a little animal or something like a goat or a sheep or a cow to get manure from it and get milk from the cow and to butcher a pig in those times and corn it. We ain't had no fridgiders (refrigerators) or nothing. Corn the meat and you will have that to feed the family. Corn meat--salt. Preserve it. Fish and so on. Catch the fish. They corn the fish. Now these last generation that come up now--you can't give them that class a' food. They don't like it.[16]

When Elridge was five and six years old his mother paid three cents a day for him to go to private school. "Five, six years, that's a private school. Old people like Gran used to keep a little private school." [17] These women taught the alphabet and counting to children. "After you come to seven years, you had to go to public school." [18] As to Elridge's formal education, sixteen years of age was the end of public school for most children on Statia (St. Eustatius).

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[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 16 June 1985.

[18]Ibid.

Before Elridge could go to school at 8:00 a.m., he would first have to rise early and take the goats to pasture:

At early morning break, we'd be out. I'd get up about five o'clock in the morning. First thing, had to go look to check--my mother would make me take the goats out. We had goats. We kept goats. About a dozen goats. We built a pen in the back yard. Bring them in at night. Tie them and early in the morning we take them out with stakes. Stake them out in the field. It wasn't our land, the field, it was company land. The company that had been workin' over there (the sisal plant). A lot of the boys and girls had to take out the goats. That would take me about a half hour. Then I come back and after, I get ready for school.[19]

He would then have breakfast: "A little bread, tea. Maybe a piece of fish or butter on the bread." [20] The tea Elridge refers to is "bush tea." It is made from various bushes such as lime or mango leaves. "Pour boiling water over the leaves and add milk and sugar." [21]

In going to school: "You went in at eight, come out at ten. You go back in half past ten and then you study again 'till one. Then, one o'clock, you're dismissed for the day." [22]

There were no separate classrooms for children of different ages or sex in Elridge's day. The schoolteacher, appointed by the government, was Mr. Scott Barrow from Curacao. All of Elridge's formal education took place at the old school on the Bredeweg. It is ironic that the place where Elridge spent all his early days is now the setting for his retirement days, doing carpentry

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[19] Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 26 June 1985.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.



"bench" work and making coffins:

You go to school here (on the Bredeweg), you never used to get nothin' to eat and all you used to get was a drink a' water. That's all! The children of today could go to school hungry and get all they want to eat in school. They get fruit, they get peanuts, they get milk, they get everything! You can go to school hungry.[23]

As a child, Elridge never had the opportunity to learn to read or write Dutch or go to school in Aruba or Curacao. These were options for the wealthy only. "See in those days we didn't have that chance. Today the children got that opportunity because after they pass the sixth class here, they send them to Curacao and Aruba, and they can go and study enough to go to a university." [24] He sees the government being largely responsible for this situation: "The government was a different class of government. It wasn't a 'political government' in those days, it was what you'd call a 'colonial government.' A 'colonial government' ruled from Holland, not from Curacao." [25] Thus, Elridge learned to read and write English, the common language of the Windward Islands.

"When we came from school, you had to go out to work, to learn to do something! I leave school when I was sixteen years." [26] But even before he reached sixteen, Elridge was busy after school. "You had to learn a trade!" [27] At one o'clock he would go home:

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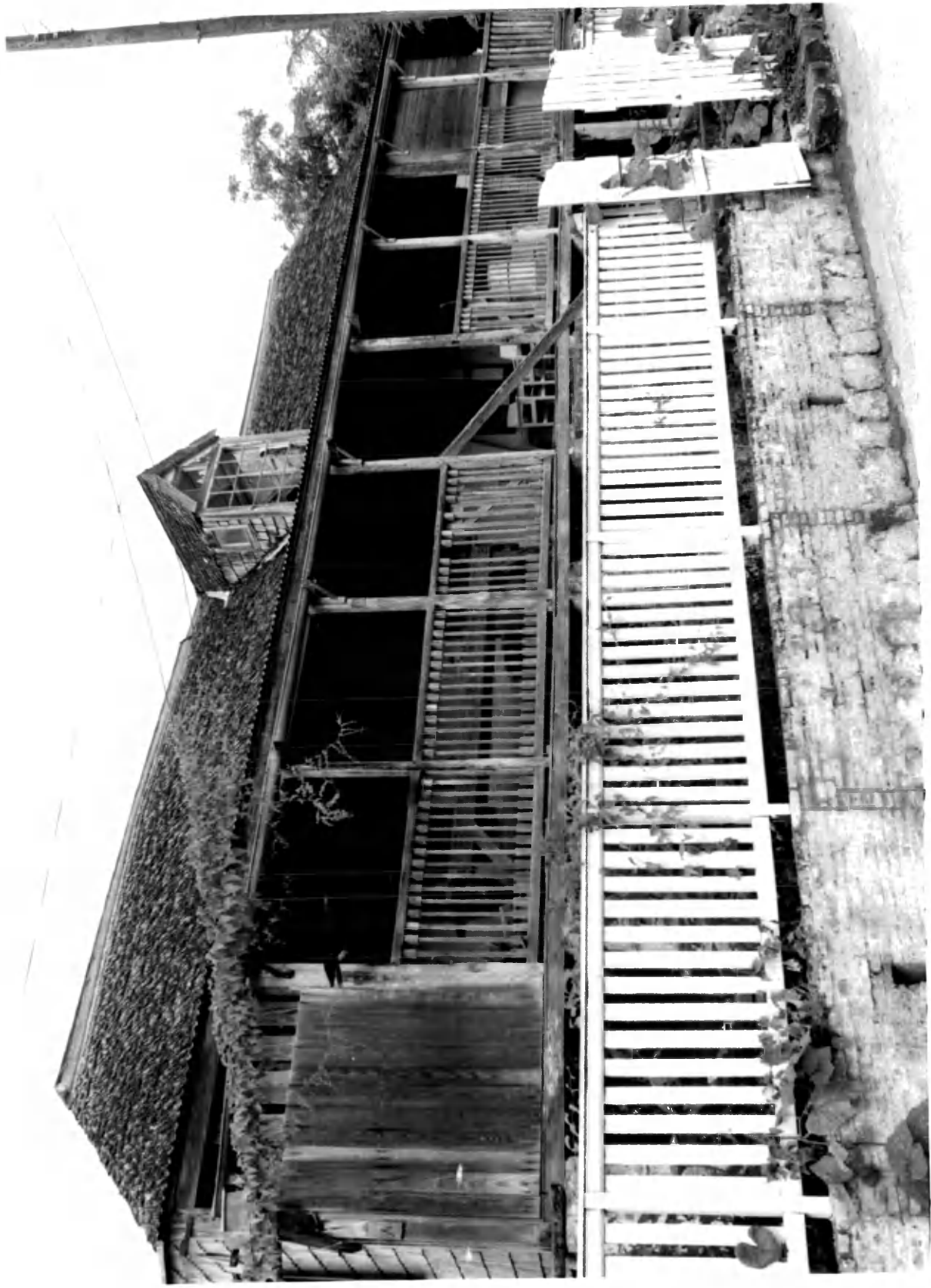
[23] Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 21 July 1985.

[24] Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 18 August 1985.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.



You get something to eat and (then go to) near where the fellow workin', I go with him to see what he's doing. The carpenter fellow--the boss. A fellow by the name of Leo Robbins from Antigua. He came here in 1910. He came here lookin' for a job, because all us that live here feel for a job. (With respect to the word "feel," Elridge is implying that jobs have been and are difficult to find--one has to search for opportunities.)[28]

Although this work with Mr. Robbins meant that young Elridge would have the opportunity to learn carpentry work as a teenage apprentice, he previously had experience, as other boys did, learning carpentry with the men of his own family. "I had a lot of experience from home, building coffins and doing different things." [29] For example, at age 10, he began to learn coffinmaking from his grandfather and other carpenters in the backyard:

If anybody had a coffin to build, they would go and buy a bottle of rum and bring it to the carpenters and they would get together. Just give them the rum. They would say: 'You boys, the best a' you go and get ahead--you do that!' You see? So you had to do it! They're drinking the rum--they ain't givin' you none. But they see that you work! Yes, with their drink, they got them there, but they ain't givin' you none. They used to be mostly under a tree, under an old tree. 'Bring the tools!' You had to take care of the tools and everything. Sometimes they had three, four, five, six of us around. 'Yes, go ahead and do that, you got to cover it! You got to put on the cloth. We gonna make it, then we gonna drink, then you go ahead and get the cloth on--and do it damn good too!' Your parents would make you do it. Spank you. Hit you with a belt. Make you. They say: 'If you ain't gonna come around here to work--go!' If my grandfathers were there, they would just sit down and talk. My uncle was a carpenter. My father was a carpenter. My two

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[28]Ibid.

[29]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 11 August 1985.



grandfathers were carpenters.[30]

Elridge explains the process of how young boys learned to build a coffin:

After we practice for about five or six months, you had to work, if you didn't do the work, after a year passed, they ain't humbuggin' with you again. But you had to learn or you would go fishin' or go work in the fields. So you had to work. The first thing you had to learn was the rule. And then we didn't have these class a' rule (tape measure). We had the two feet rules--twenty-four inches. One that fold up. I'll show you one of them. Old time rule. And we use a ten foot rod. English style. I had a volume of books and I gave them to this same Junie--these books from the school. My father sent them down here for me. They show you how to square with a ten foot rod. Six, eight, and tens. You make a square. You had that in your mind. And then you use a ten foot rod for layin' out.[31]

But Elridge also had to do work at home, taking care of the family goats, collecting wood, or working with his sisters in the garden and yard. These tasks were daily jobs, done after school, in the company of other children, who were carrying out their own tasks as well. The boys would always finish collecting the wood and carry it home on their heads before turning attention to "pitching" marbles or picking kinnups.

Goats where important to the family as they provided milk, manure, and, as a last resort, meat:

We used to make our own butter too, from the milk. You milk the goats, and we boil the milk, and we take the cream from the milk, and we throw it in the next bottle and save it until when we get a whole big bottle of cream. You throw salt in it and

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[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid.

you keep it. Make it just like to taste, with salt and a few days after, you throw water on it and keep shakin' it, shakin' it, shakin' it for five-six hours. You could make your own butter with cream.[32]

"The butter was set in a thing a' water on the plate. You take the butter and the pan and fill it in the plate with water. Keep it there for all the time. Day, week, weeks! (Laugh.) It don't spoil!"[33]

The Timber Family tried to maintain self-sufficiency when clothing and feeding themselves. Clothing for Elridge, as it was for his peers, was home-made. He wore suspenders to hold up his loose fitting pants. His favorite foods were sweet corn and Johnny cakes. The family used "a flat iron" on which they baked their Johnny cakes:

You bake your Johnny cakes dry. You use grease for some, that's if you have a dishpan, throw your grease on it. Lard, we used to call it. You get that from the cow or the hog. You use that fat to fry your meal.[34]

Fresh vegetables also appear to be of greater availability on the island at this time:

You know what we used to have plenty of? Corn! Sweet corn. I like sweet corn, but we very seldom have it in these days. I miss it. You see you take that corn and you boil it. It stays fresh. Yea, you can eat it! And when its a little hard, then you roast it. Oh, you eat that corn and shell it off, it's on a long row, you know? You shell it off. You see they used to save the seeds. Old farmers--old, old, old men. They, some of them,

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[32]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 21 July 1985.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

had a big family, a family of eight, nine, ten children. They used to take them to the field with them. They had to do the clearin' of the plantation.[35]

Although Elridge enjoys the conveniences of modern technology on the island today, he still reminisces about the quality of life in the "old" days:

I miss a lot of things. The food used to eat better. More fresh. The food was more nice to eat--more solid. In the colonial days there were butchers employed by the government, but not today. Today people use the place themselves.[36]

Elridge recalled the practice of salting pork. First make cuts in the meat and put liberal amounts of salt, black pepper, and garlic in these incisions. Soak all of this in water overnight and hang it up to dry in the hot sun on the next day. This would dry up and allow for the meat to keep for days. One could then cut off pieces as they were needed: "Like if you were going to make pea soup, you could put that meat right in the soup." [37]

Today, Elridge's wife and sisters bake breads and cakes in their large permanent stone ovens once a week. These ovens are built with concrete and stone. In the days of Elridge's youth, such an oven was something the family could hope one day to own. Although his father had the skill to build this type of oven, it was impractical to build one without owning the land on which it was to be placed. "No, you couldn't do it unless the land was yours, if you had

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[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid.

your own property."[38] The family, therefore, had to make use of coal pots or portable bake ovens made through carpentry skills:

Three stones! Three fire stones. Three big stones. We place them and we put the wood and cut up the wood short and put it in them and set the pot on them. No, we ain't had no oven. Used to bake the old time way. Yes. You fill a coal pot full of coals, big, iron pot full of coals and then you put big, flat bread in the pot and then you put a thin sheet on top and you put coals on top of that. Yes, you make a big, flat bread. The bread was big. On the lid, you could roast potatoes and everything. That's the old time way.[39]

A portable bake oven was a wood and sheet metal bake oven:

"The box is about 48" high and about 24" wide. All on the inside you have tin. The fire's inside. An iron coal pot."[40] This oven also contains shelves, on iron rods, above the coal pot, for bread and cakes.

Alcohol appears to been much more heavily consumed by the population of men in the past then it is today. Elridge said he used to drink while he was working:

Here? All kinds of liquor. They used to drink Bliden, from the prickly tree. They used to make that. You plant the Sorrell and the Sorrell grow in a big pod—a red pod. And you pick it and break them off. It's mostly grown in the month of December, November-December. You have them for the Christmas. You pick off all the things off it and you steam it in warm water and you throw something into them—spice and all a' that sort of thing. It tastes nice. you got to add alcohol with it.[41]

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[38]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 22 August 1985.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid.

[41]Ibid.

We didn't have no fridge (refrigerator). No ice. What we used to have is--a--limes, sour orange--acid oranges, lemons. They used them for drinks. Cut the thirst and so on. The next thing they got here they call the Tamarin. You pick them and you soak them in warm water and then you add different things to them and you drink that. Up to now Curacao familiar with them. Nice to drink--cooling. All over the island the Tamarin trees grow, big trees, high trees. They drop (the fruit) to the ground.[42]

All the family members worked in the garden. "Yes, we plant a little cultivation. Potatoes. Sweet potatoes, sometimes we would plant cabbage, we plant some different other things. Tomatoes, corn, all a' that." [43] The Timbers' had a large garden:

Yes, because we had a piece a' land over on the south side where we lived. Maybe fifty foot square. All worked--all had to work--up to now you know my sisters go a field to plant sweet peppers and all a' that stuff now." [44]

We worked 'till we're tired. We ain't had no special time. Up to now my sisters still keeps goats. They got in the back, she got goats. You go to sleep about eight, nine o'clock. You couldn't be out on the road--they wouldn't allow us to come out. Yea, nearly all the families (with children), my age, the children--we couldn't come on the road like these children are on the road. If you go out later than eight or nine o'clock, you would get licks! They thought it was bad for you to go out. And then, they used to fool you with jumbies (laugh). Spooks! (Laugh.) 'You go outside-you'll see that spook!' Just to frighten you. You know? They used to have a Tamarin tree right here. They tell you there were jumbies around it. Jumbies would frighten you! Make you believe that you are dead! You could come back (from the dead) and do this and the other! Dead people can do bad things. Yea. The dead, cowardness, makes him believe that he's dead! But he's got powers. He can come back and frighten

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[42]Ibid.

[43]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 24 August 1985.

[44]Ibid.

you! All of that they make you believe. Jumbies could take a little boy or girl away! You'd never see them again. That was the belief, but today, I don't believe in it. But when I was small I believed it. Yes, I believed in it! You would be scared. Here, as soon as the sun set, they're in the house. You see in the modern world today...it is far different. It's so corrupt...the children today gettin' worried and do the wrong things, doin' to other people. Too much freedom, too much liberty for them. Yea, you learn to smoke marijuana. You can't tell these young children about jumbies today, it doesn't bother them, they don't care! In the old days it was different, you might have to watch out for the jumbies of a dead person for some 60 days after the death! When I was small, I had to go for bread right past the Dutch Reformed Cemetery. I would say: 'Please to give me the bread before it gets dark!' I said that because I was afraid to walk past the cemetery after dark![45]

Young Elridge had to go to church on Sundays (the Methodist Church) with his mother and sisters or he would not be fed. The main event before the service, for Elridge and the other boys, was a race to see which boy would be the first to ring the old bell in the steeple. Today young boys no longer keep up this practice and an older gentleman on the island takes up the task. When he is sick, Elridge volunteers for duty.

Children also went to Sunday School at 3:00 pm:

Used to have a Sunday School every three o'clock. But now these last years the children become so wild and smart, they had to change it from three o'clock in the afternoon to morning. The children were going dancin'. Party dancin'. The children go to that.[46]

Sundays traditionally have been a time of relaxation for the entire family. No work was done. "We just rest up at home." [47]

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[45]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 20 August 1985.

[46]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 25 August 1985.

[47]Ibid.

But this was the day that Elridge liked to go with his friends to the beach. The boys would only spend a few hours. "My mother would lick me if she knew I was gone to the beach and didn't tell her!"[48] But Elridge did not tell her, because such adventures were considered to be the foolishness of "idle boys," something which no mother appreciated:

You come back, you got to hide. I got to steal my food! (Laugh.) A fellow here was tellin' me a few weeks ago, about two weeks ago, a man of about seventy six or seventy-eight years old, he was tellin' me when he was a boy he used to be pitchin' marbles! So this day, he say, he went home. His mother say: 'You come in here, when you come in here I'm gonna lick the Dickens out of you!' He say he remember my aunt, an aunt of mine call her, his mother: 'Oh, Ellie! Come here a minute and let me show you something. Look at one of these boys here, it looks like his foot is sprained. Look! He fall over a tree and he sprain his foot.' She say: 'Oh, yes!' He said by the time he hear her say 'Oh, yes,' he wait and he see where she went--to my aunt. He lick inside the house and he took up the food and he eat it all quick! (Laugh.) He escaped that lickin' because she went now to see that boy's foot. 'Yes, my dear sister, you see I was gonna lick that boy a' mine because he just come in here and I tell him I'm not gonna give him no food out of the kitchen.' But he went with the food and was gone. (Laugh.) See, he got the food and he clear out. That's the only way he got the food. He said he'd been hungry. Afraid of licks![49]

Fishing was also an adventure which took place on the beach. Children used long fishing poles. The initial bait might be a soldier crab found on land. "After the first fish was caught it can be cut up and used as bait to catch other fish."[50] In fishing for

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[48]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 26 June 1985.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 11 August 1985.

lobster, Elridge said they might set out bait for days to lure the lobster in. He laughed: "We would spend so much time just to get one lobster!"[51]

But time, whether it was spent fishing or in gardening, was something of which there was plenty. In fact, there was much more time then there ever was money. "Most people did not have money in the colonial days."[52] Carpenters' work might be paid off in yams, sweet potatoes, goats, or pigs. People even paid store bills with such items. This was because their harvests came in January and February. The store owners would take these items and sell them to ships for export. Some people, though, never had enough to pay off the storeowner. Nevertheless, Elridge believes, given the cost of living in the Caribbean today, things were relatively inexpensive:

In 1928, an average size house (9'X10') would cost a person about 25 guilders to have a carpenter build. One guilder would have also bought you enough fish for two days! Only two fellows on the island had nets, they did most of the fishing. In 1932, you could have bought a sheet of galvanizing for the roof (a piece about 6' long) for a guilder! Things was cheap then, very cheap![53]

Elridge pointed out that the ability to get water free from a cistern should be veiwed as a "modern" pleasure. In the days of his youth, you had to pay for water:

'I will sell you a pan for a cent!' One cent, two cents and a half. Sell you tea bag water, maybe the kind you will drink

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[51]Ibid.

[52]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 18 August 1985.

[53]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 21 July 1985.



in the house, but we didn't have no fridge (refrigerator), we didn't have no cooler. To keep water cool for a drink, you would have to keep it in a clay pot.[54]

Very few people had a cistern. We had to get water from the well. This well here--got a well just above here. It's a very deep well. Comes from a spring underground. Washing was a fatigue, because they didn't have no cisterns. You go and you get you two or three tins of water there and you go to the bay and you drove it on your head, in square tins. You got a big drum, a wooden drum. You put it in your house and you put it and save it there. Take tins and barrels, and then throw ashes in it to bring it lighter and wash with it. Wash peoples' clothes and all a' that. And if you got a next container, you put it outside so you catch water when the rain come and you keep that for drinkin'.[55]

Apparently, many square shaped cisterns were built in the 1930s and 40s on St. Eustatius. "Round-back" cisterns date from slavery days but were not used because "they never looked to repair them,"[56] and they fell into disrepair. "Around the thirties-forties, they come up to build them this way, like you saw that one over there in my sister's yard, that contains water coming from the roof."[57]

Yea, in those days it was tough! Very tough. But things was cheap! Very cheap. You didn't make much money. Yes, your family used to keep up goats. Goats. Chickens. Cows. Some had horses. They never used to eat the horse though. Ride the horse. They had donkeys. More donkeys than horses. And after that in 1914, the same year I was born, a company came here and started manufacturin'--the sisal plant. Yes, that you made rope from.

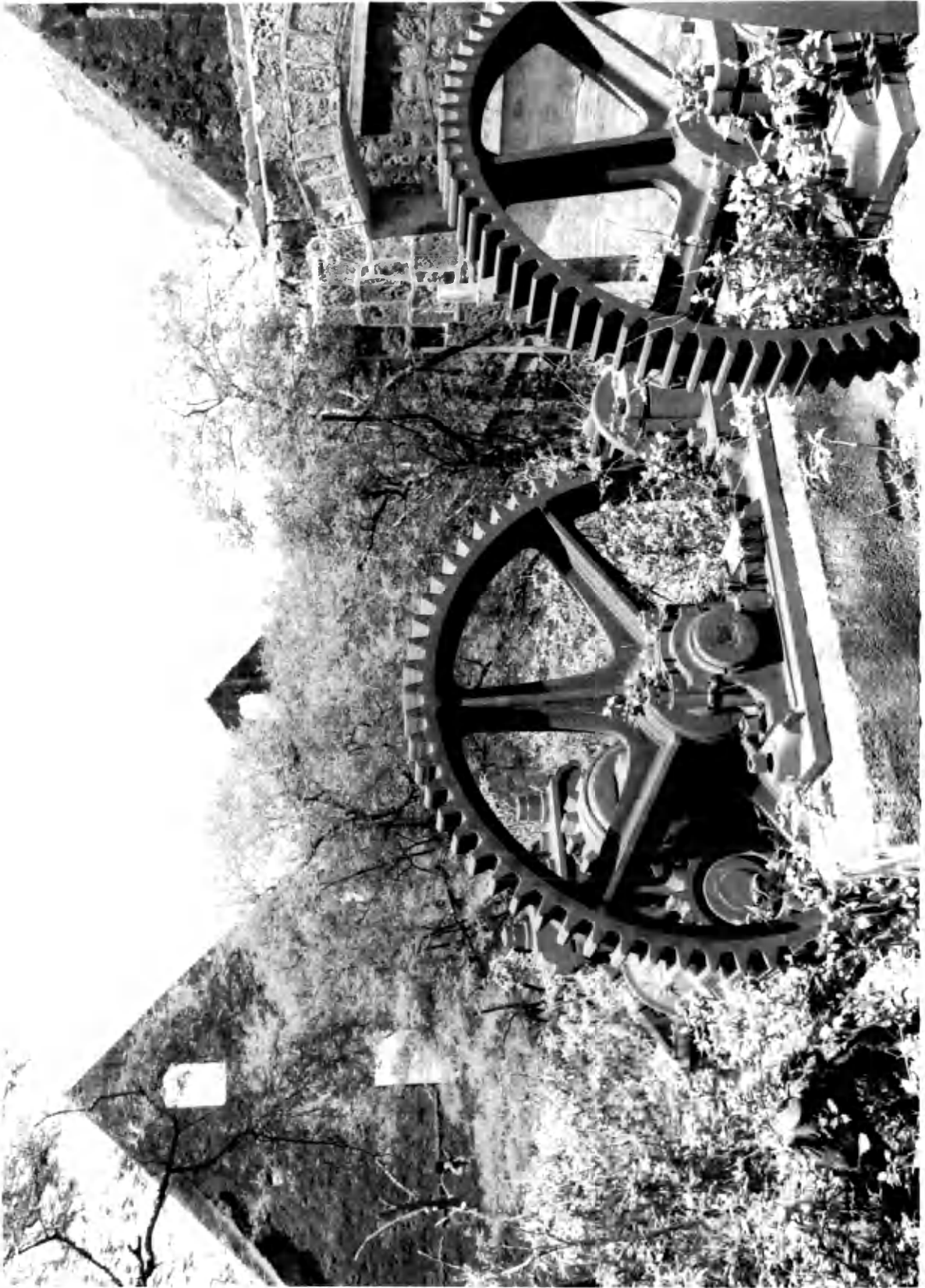
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[54]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 14 July 1985.

[55]Ibid.

[56]Ibid.

[57]Ibid.



That lasted until about 1922. My father worked there, but when they left, he went to the United States.[58]

He found work with the whalers. He was going to sea from a boy, with my grandfather. My grandfather teach all of them to go to sea. The whale ship that used to come from New Bedford, that used to sail, would pick men to go to sea, to fish for whales. Sometimes they go fish for six months. The fish they was catchin', they fish for six months, (then) they go to New Bedford. They put off the load and the crew and then they would go back out for the next six months. Those who want to come. Those who didn't want to come, they stayed in the States.[59]

My father might have stayed on Statia if the sisal plant stayed, because he was a good progressor. He made some good money. Women, as well as men. The women that were employed there, about sixty odd women, and more than a hundred and eighty-two men worked with machines, some work in the fields, takin' care of the sisal, some do the cutting of the sisal--bundling. My father, he used to work in the machine and blacksmith, operatin' the machines where they used to make rope. Spin it together and then they used to bale it and ship it to England and make it for America. He learned skills from the fellows, the engineers that was here, the Englishmen. They had a blacksmith shop. They had an engineer and everything. They used to make all the yokes for the animal's neck. All the sharpin', the carts that used to pull the materials on the field. He used to work over there.[60]

Mr. Timber's father also maintained his own forge in the family's backyard:

He had an old forge in the yard down there. Back in the yard there, the remenants of it still must be somewhere there. He used to turn iron, the black coal--the charcoal. The blacksmith coal and had a bellows. Burn it and put iron in it, cooks it and take on the donkey, he make iron for all sorts a'

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[58]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 22 June 1985.

[59]Ibid.

[60]Ibid.

things.[61]

The sisal come from the Bahamas, they brought it here from the Bahamas--the plants. Within six months, after they were planted, they had a harvest crop. Every six months they would harvest. See the land here was strong and fertile and good. Good land. In between sisal, spaced four feet apart, had a space between there, they would plant a crop of sweet cassavas. They would make starch from that. Starch for clothes. Ship it away. They also used to plant a thing what you call arrowroot! That was too. They used to ship it in small boxes. That was like medicine for small babies and so on. They used to give it to children to eat as fat in porridge.[62]

The cassava, you wring it out and you sift it out, and they parch it in a big copper. It come like corn meal. It come brown, and they use it for a porridge. Sprinkle sugar with it and throw a little corn in it and you boil it. Then you eat it.[63]

The sisal manufacturer was an English company, they came from the Bahamas. They were very fair to the people. They used up a lot of land. The old estates on the land. That place where you are livin' now (the Antillean View Hotel). The whole of that place was sisal and sugar cane too. They used to manufacture sugar cane over there also. If you had a good crop of sugar cane the company would take it and dry it and you would get the sugar from it and give them so much percent. They get so much percent. Still, you do well.[64]

Everything went by boat! Everything was by boat. In and out was boats. We had, just shortly after, the pier was built in 1910, that iron old pier you see down there--short one--by the Gin House. And it was operating up 'till 1918. Around 1920, they took the planks off of it and the iron started to rust. Took the planks off because the pier was too short. Yea, they thinkin' about gettin' a bigger one--the government--that was the government. It is hard to have piers on Statia. All the ages through, 'till just a few years ago here, we get this one here. No, they didn't have any older piers.[65]

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[61]Ibid.

[62]Ibid.

[63]Ibid.

[64]Ibid.

[65]Ibid.

## CHAPTER II

### A LIFETIME OF WORK AND THE MAKING OF A MAN, 1934-79

Elridge had to go to work at age sixteen, after his education, because he had to help pay the land taxes and his "sisters had to eat and drink." [66] As previously noted, Elridge began his carpentry work with Mr. Robbins, a carpenter and joiner. However, if young Elridge had had his way, he would have preferred to go to sea. "Well, in my day, went past with the whalers, so I didn't have that opportunity to go to sail. Another thing, my mother wouldn't allow me to go." [67] Elridge would have liked the adventure. He did have some time sailing with his grandfather, Henry Milton Timber, but his mother firmly maintained her position. "She wouldn't allow me to go. 'You know you're the only boy son I got.' Yea, I wanted to go to see the outside world. I was all around 20 years old then." [68] Because Elridge obeyed his mother and did not go to sea, he cannot navigate as his father and grandfather before him. "They had charts, a log, sextant, and a compass in those days. They would sail by the stars also!" [69] Elridge, unlike young men today, had to learn carpentry from experience, not in school. Elridge started carpentry with

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[66] Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 14 July 1985.

[67] Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 21 July 1985.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 22 June 1985.

Robbins because his mother thought it was best. She asked Mr. Robbins to take her only son on as an apprentice. "She was acquainted with him. She know that he was very popular." [70] Robbins was also a friend of one of Elridge's uncles. When Elridge first started working for him, he was told that he would have to work for three years without pay:

The government is giving the money for me. Me and Robbins, and he's keeping the money. When he was looking for me, you had to obey. But sometimes I would hide and wouldn't go to work. I'd go pitchin' marbles. One day, in the morning, when I was going to school, I met him down by Mr. Lampe's place. 'Hey boy, you ain't come back to work!' I say: 'No, because you ain't give me no money.' He said: 'Alright, alright, take this five guilders.' I said: 'Alright, I'll go back now.' So I went back in the evening. He was glad too! He went to my mother and said: 'The boy is a good boy. I do believe he's become a man, a young man!' [71]

This statement, by Robbins, is a truly significant point concerning an event in Elridge's life, as it can be viewed as a rite of passage. This is because the matter of getting paid for one's work is very important here to Elridge. It separates childhood from adulthood. When Elridge wasn't being paid for his work he felt as if he were cheated and was not contributing to his family's welfare. Therefore, he maintained his social position as a youth: "pitchin' marbles." When he confronted Robbins directly concerning his entitlement to pay, he not only received compensation, but respect: 'I do believe he's become a man...' [72]

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[70]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 11 August 1985.

[71]Ibid.

[72]Ibid.

Thus, we should consider this as a rite of passage in Elridge's life, his transition from a child at play dependent on his mother, to a working man who takes responsibility for helping to contribute to family finances:

I stayed with him for over two years and he gave me .75 a day. Yes, it was very, very helpful to the family. And they did like him too. My mother did. She said he was a very interesting man. He was a good man who could work carpenter, plumber, cabinetmaker, and wood joiner. Different trades.[73]

Elridge's mother was impressed with Robbins and the knowledge that he could give to her son. She knew that a variety of skills would be helpful to Elridge in his search to make a living. Learning a variety of skills meant that many more opportunities would be available for the future: "It is best! It was best you learn something here, learn a little more, all the time you could continue your learning. The better off for work! If you don't help yourself, nobody will help you."[74]

The preceding paragraph tells us something about the duties of being a good parent in St. Eustatius society. Clearly, Elridge and his sisters believe the work attitudes and ethics taught by their mother were extremely valuable in helping them to be successful in life. "She was a good mother to us, because when we come from school, had to go out to work, to learn to do something!"[75] Even though her family was poor she set an example for her children that

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[73]Ibid.

[74]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 16 August 1985.

[75]Ibid.

the qualities of self-sufficiency and industriousness were important:

My mother did not like to borrow anything and she would not lend. She said it was better to do for yourself. When you are poor and you borrow something, what are you going to do if you break it? You must replace it for the owner! You must buy for yourself. My mother bought tools. She had her own rake and hammer and other things.[76]

But Elridge's time with Robbins was limited:

He had a job workin' for a fellow in the north (of the island). He follow the fellow in the north. He was drinkin', so the fellow say he don't want him no more. So the fellow caught him. He say he lost confidence in him.[77]

So, by the time Elridge was 21 years old, he had to do his own job and help Mr. Robbins out as well:

Yes, I had to help him too. He came there, join in, say he got nothing to do. So I said: 'Ok, you can come over here by me and make a day's work.' (I) Help him. All through my life, I never did work nothin' but carpentry. Yes, buildin' houses. Yes, but the houses were small, no bigger than 9' X 10' X 12'. They used to take those and set them on nogs. We used to dig the holes ourselves. I work--two, three of us boys join together and work. I had a cousin, two cousins, three of us, we work together. One is still alive here now. One fellow name was Alred Euson. The next one was a Roda. Ovin Roda. We worked all the years through. About 30 odd years ago. Then we all draw away from one another.[78]

But, for a brief time, in 1935, there was not enough carpentry work to do on St. Eustatius, and Elridge had to try his hand at other forms of work:

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[76]Ibid.

[77]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 17 August 1985.

[78]Ibid.



In 1935, when I couldn't work carpenter, when I ain't make enough for carpenter, I go fishing! We had a small boat, me and a cousin a' mine, and we fishin', just set traps catch lobster and fish. Sell them here. Here on Statia. My cousin's name was John Mais. Turned out good! Right up to now, here on the island, there is only two of us on the island, my age, that do any repairs to boats.[79]

During 1935, Elridge also went to Curacao to find work. He stayed only three months and says that it was the most lonely experience of his life. Even though he was lonely, he had not made the trip by himself. He had come with a group of his friends and they lived and worked together. These men all worked as a maintenance crew for Shell Oil Company. Their job was to collect and move scrap iron on the company's various properties on Curacao. They were required to work Monday through Saturday with Sunday as their day off. "Drinking was a big thing to do on Sundays,[80] " Elridge recalled. Elridge would lay around on Sundays feeling depressed. "One of the fellows came up to me and said: 'Hey Timber, this is your kind of place! Why don't you borrow some carpentry tools and earn a little money on the side.' 'No man, I'm not interested.'"[81] But eventually the company did not wish to retain these employees and they were all offered passage from Curacao. Elridge quickly grasped the opportunity to sail for Statia. The other fellows urged him to seek other job opportunities with them in Aruba. But his course of action was clear: "No

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[79]Ibid.

[80]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 15 August 1985.

[81]Ibid.

man! I want to go home!"[82]

When he arrived on Statia, Elridge went directly to his grandmother's house to collect the tools he had left in her care. Later that day his uncle stopped by and said: 'Boy, it is a good thing you are home right now--we got a house to build!'[83]

As far as employment on the island was concerned, Elridge's timing could not have been better:

I started afterwards to work for the government. Me and Jimmie Roda, together. He was an old man. He was a cousin of mine, and I learned a lot from him. I pick up out a' that. Yes, right were he left off. Yes, we worked together, coffins and everything. I don't think Jimmie Roda was as good as me because I had the modern experience. It was mixed (experience), you see? Jimmie had more of the old English ways in him. I work with contractors from St. Maarten, a fellow by the name of Scott. He teach us a lot of the modern Dutch building and so on. That was around in the forties, a little before the war. Mr. Scott came to St. Maarten here and he was all the time readin' the print (blueprint) for us and everything. The headman! He was a young man. He went to Santo Domingo and all down there. But after, he came back to St. Maarten. He was the first one to start construction building in St. Maarten. The most useful I learned from him was how to mix the concrete, to have it in good condition. Steel, how to lay it down. All of that. I could not learn that from my family, we had more wooden construction.[84]

It was during this time that Elridge began his family:

My first child was born in 1936. My son. He's dead. His name was Raphael, Max Raphael. He died when he was seven years old. Appendix--had an appendix burst on him. There was one doctor here on the island, the same as there is now, but we had no plane. Didn't burst on him here, burst one the way to St. Maarten. On the boat. We didn't have no plane at that time, no

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[82]Ibid.

[83]Ibid.

[84]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 20 August 1985.

airport. We had to go by boat. We took him from here to St. Maarten. Myself went, the mother went and my sister went. We got a schooner from Curacao takin' sweet potatoes and yams here. The government paid it. We stopped them takin' the sweet potatoes and yams and they rush over there. By the time we got to St. Maarten in the evening, around eight o'clock, we took him to the hospital--he dropped over dead, gettin' ready to operate. Before gettin' to the hospital it burst! On the way over on the boat. We went in St. Maarten. Then when we get in the hospital and they examin' him and they say the appendix is burst inside him. 'We're gonna give him heavy injections and see if we can pump it together.' They give him the injections and about an hour after he called back and he say: 'He died. He passed out right away.' He died there and no plane to bring him back and the boat was scared to bring him back, so we buried him there.[85]

Those days with St. Maarten was bad days. We had no ship. They had no plane. Everything was rough and ready! Didn't have no telephone. Had one telephone--had a cable radio, you had that. We order a plane now when we want, order things we want.[86]

After he died, the night, an hour or two and we wait. The next morning the hospital told we must come there and make arrangements for the burial. Make arrangements and everything. Well, a cousin a' mine introduced me to a carpenter to build the coffin, and he started in. But in the height of it, the man got drunk. He got drunk. He played the fool. So, I get vexed. I take it away, and I had to finish it myself. After everything was over now he sent me a bill. I told him: 'Well, I got to consider this is my cousin,' cause my cousin is the one who get him. He said: 'Oh man, you take away the work and you do it yourself! You got to pay me!' 'I had to do it myself because you drinking the rum--not just takin' a little piece to clear your throat.' He said: 'Alright, alright...' Anyhow, I gave him fifteen dollars, fifteen American dollars. He just didn't care. But then, about two weeks after, I went back to St. Maarten to do some carpenter work--shipwright work for that same fellow. And I worked with that fellow for one week and he didn't know I was the man. He worked there too, with me. He met me before, but he

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[85]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 18 August 1985.

[86]Ibid.

couldn't remember. You see, the alcohol had him. After a week is past now workin' there, he turned to me and said: 'Tell me something, you ain't the fellow that had the baby die over here?' I said: 'Yes, I's the same fellow.' He said: 'What's you name?' I tell him my name. He said: 'My God! Man, I sorry I know that I had to treat you like that! I very sorry.' I said: 'Well, that done pass.' 'Man,' he said: 'I should never treat you that bad. I thought you were some old man comin' here and yellin'...Oh, I'm sorry.' I work there with him. I had to help him there! He was not exactly a shipwright, he was just a carpenter. He didn't know shipwright, but the fellow got him in order to...because he couldn't do nothin'--try to get somebody. He told me. We became good friends. He was an aged man too. He was a man up in his seventies--seventy five years--plenty old man.[87]

All the other three of my children, I had four, the other three are alive. The next two girls and the next boy. They live in Curacao. That same year (1944), they all went to Curacao. They all went with their mother, Joyce Landsmark. [88]

The names of the couple's children, in order of their birth, are: Max Raphael, Norma Teres, Gloria Emilda, and Henry Albertis. The last child takes his first name from Elridge's grandfather and his second name from his mother's father's name.

After the children were born, Elridge and Joyce made the decision that all of their offspring would be legally registered under the Timber family name. This had to be a mutual agreement, as it was the law that a man must have the woman's permission to register the children in his family's name, if the children were born out of wedlock. Thus, each child was registered within ten days after birth, with the government, as being Elridge's "lawful" children. Elridge says that he is glad that this registration took place and that his name is "clear." He pointed out the

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[87]Ibid.

[88]Ibid.

importance of this when speaking of his marriage to Ms. Maynard.

Elridge was deeply saddened by the fact that Joyce Landsmark left the island with his children--their children. He begged her to stay on the island with him and the children so they could remain as a family. But it appears that several factors contributed to this migration to Curacao. It has previously been discussed that the family already went through the traumatic experience of Max Raphael's death. Additionally, the economic conditions, as well as the availability of public services, were more favorable on Curacao than on St. Eustatius. Another important factor was that both Elridge and Joyce had relatives on Curacao:

My people were gone to Curacao, her mother was down there, her aunt was down there, her cousin was down there. It was hard! She tried to work hard, takin' care of them. Then after that my family move in, there was an aunt and so on. Yea, she had to work down there. She used to work a snack bar and so on. She used to work different places.[89]

So Joyce not only wanted to make a better future for herself and her children, she also had to take care of family members who had also made the decision to emigrate. Elridge indicated that Joyce believed she had an obligation to be with her mother and take care of her.

But Elridge was acquainted with life on Curacao and would have no part of it:

She was down there with those kids for 32 years! She was down there with them. After 32 years I didn't know them, they didn't know me. The last was born, he was just a year and a half old. Then they left. One of the girls was 3 and the next girl she was

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[89]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 17 August 1985.

2. They were there 32 years, then different of them (i.e. family members on Curacao) tell me the children say they would like to know me and that I should go down there to Curacao. I said: 'I would like to know them, too.' Well, I told their mother to send them up here. Come to see me. At that time she had other children, she get more down there, by some other men. But she didn't marry. So, one Christmas I, I think it was the same year the phones got installed here. I happened to get a phone number and call. I speak to her. I said: 'It is Christmas, you must come up.' She said: 'You must send me the money to come.' At this time the children were all grown up now. They say they ain't got no money. I say: 'Alright, I will find some to send to you.' I sent down 200 guilders. At that time passage was cheap. She got it. One of the daughters told me she use up the money on some other children that she had there. She didn't come for Christmas, she came for the Bicentennial, that was in 1976. She came here in the Bicentennial (for) 14 days. In 1976. She stayed by a friend. One of the children Godmother. She supposed to be the Godmother of the oldest daughter of mine. She came and she stayed down there. We talked from one thing to another. She say I must come down. I keep put them off, puttin' them off until afterward I come to my decision. Yes, the best thing is that I come down. I don't know them, and they don't know me. Each of them had their own home, I found all of them there.[90]

None of Elridge's children has married:

No, up 'till now they ain't married. They're single. And the boy, he was livin' with the mother. So we all met. They were so happy to meet with me. Then, I went back again, and I encourage them to come up. So they came up last year. My two daughters came. The son came first. Henry. He was the first to come. He's a sailor. He works for a company called Alcoe.[91]

Elridge made a trip to Curacao in 1976 and then in 1979:

They got a whole bunch a' children, the two girls. One has five and the next one has five. Five children a piece. The son don't have no children. The girls and boys, those two (the daughters) had, their daughters got children. I got all together fifteen

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[90]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 16 August 1985.

[91]Ibid.

grandchildren and seven great-gran.[92]

The oldest granddaughter is 24 years old. Both of Elridge's oldest granddaughters, ages 24 and 23, have infants:

I got two other. One is a mid-wife nurse. She is married to a young man a year. He's a practicin' doctor. Got a next granddaughter, there in Holland, she's a stewardess, she worked for a few years studying that. She used to ride the planes all through Europe. And the son, he been all through Europe. He's been all through North America, been through all the east, he's been sailin' sixteen years.[93]

Joyce Landsmark, born on St. Eustatius on July 26, 1916, still has family members living on the island:

She got a lot of family here. She don't keep in touch with nobody, only me. Every now and then we call on the phone and talk. She has a house in Curacao. Government house. But she has sixteen children all together. Four to me, twelve others, to different fellows. One of the sons was here from Holland, about five years ago he was here. I don't think she got government money for my children. I had to send money to her. Yea, I had to send it through the priest. A small amount for you to send. I had to send for the three of them. Every month. After they had children, then I stop. See the government used to take it out and send it to the priest. They give it to the priest, and the priest send it to them down there. The Catholic priest down there. They had a society here. The Yellow Cross Society. It wasn't against my will. I would have sent even if they had no society. I would send. I did send. They (family members) said: 'Don't send no money because she's gettin' children, with this, the other, eatin' your money. But I have some Aunts and so on, Uncles, they used to look out for the children. I send a big bag of sweet potatoes and they look out for them.[94]

In Elridge's description of life on St. Eustatius during

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[92]Ibid.

[93]Ibid.

[94]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 18 August 1985.

World War II, it is clear that the island had to fend for itself. The world was at war and supplies were hard to come by. "That's the next tough life. The war was the 1940s you know. You couldn't get anything to come into you. You had a little food, with a little raining, you get a little food from the earth." [95] Because of the difficulty in getting supplies to the island, coffins had to be made by whatever means available. Apparently, the government had a large supply of thin fiber board on hand which could be framed out to be strong enough to support a body. Rope handles also had to be substituted for imported metal handles.

Because it was so difficult for a tiny island like Statia to get supplies during the war, Elridge and others made a decision to instigate more active trading with other islands by constructing their own seagoing vessels. This decision is one that Statians have practiced in the past. Elridge was familiar with this life style by his association with his grandfather, Henry Milton Timber:

My grandfather built and sailed his own boats. They were called windjammers and they had no engines. They had charts, a log, sextant, and a compass in those days. They would sail by the stars also! My Grandfather was good because he could draft out the boats. He could draft them all out. He could make the sail. He could sail them. He could do everything with them. He would decide what he wanted to build before he start, and he had two boats he owned! Two boats. One thirteen tons. The keel was twenty-five feet keel. The other one was thirty feet keel. He had two boats that I knew of. Two sloops. He was a carpenter himself. Go all over the islands. He go to St. Thomas, go to St. Barts, go to Antigua, Dominica--all about. Now all a' them is gone. All of Statia's boats are gone. Statia had up to, I heard, about up to twenty boats that belonged to Statia and to the

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[95] Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 20 August 1985.



harbor here. Sail boats. There should be some old print a' them. Some old picture of them. I don't know if you could catch up with a picture of them. Do you know Mr. Arnaud? The fellow who has got the business there? Arnaud's bar? Charlie's bar? They used to have boats from a way down there right up to where they got the bunker station on the harbor there, all boats, Statia sloops. Here one goin' to St. Thomas, the next one going to St. Croix, the next one goin' Dominica, the next one goin' to St. Barts. All belongs to Statia! All Statia people! Sailors, young boys. Had a lot a' sailors. He could tell you a lot a' history about Statia, Mr. Arnaud. And especially about his whalin', too! He went from here seventeen years old, a boy, to sea.[96]

My grandfather used to go to a tiny place called Bird Island (120 miles southwest of Statia). It was just a flat piece of land and maybe it was a mile wide. But there was plenty of fish there, all kinds, and there was turtles too! Also, at certain times of the year, birds with webbed feet would come there from the North Atlantic to nest. My grandfather and others would pick eggs there. The birds were so thick there that you could take a stick and by swingin' it you could actually kill some before they got into the air![97]

All of these things from Bird Island could be sold at St. Thomas. My grandfather could then buy things we needed on Statia; such as cloth, flour, spices, and shoes. My grandfather liked to buy Gin too![98]

Elridge's grandfather would catch birds and fish while at sea. Bird and turtle eggs were transported. Elridge reports that the turtle eggs could last up to a week at sea. It was only a one day trip from Bird Island to Statia, and twice the distance to go to St. Thomas to trade.

So, in the 1940s, Elridge formed a partnership with his cousin Jimmie Roda, and uncle, James Timber to build a 13 1/2 ton

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[96]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 21 August 1985.

[97]Ibid.

[98]Ibid.

sloop. Elridge was designated as the man who would actually build the sloop, with Uncle James and Cousin Jimmie (much older men at this time) as his guides:

(James Timber) He was my grandfather's son. He been sailin' all about with my grandfather, then after, he went to the States. He sail all around Africa and before he went, he worked. He knew a lot of this work 'cause he used to work with my grandfather. Everything buildin', we would bring to his attention, and he would say: 'Build as so...'[99]

It took Elridge and his advisors "a little over two years...[100] " to build the boat:

I build that during the war time. Guided by they, I was responsible. Yes. We had to go all around the mountain. They had to show me what kind a' wood to cut. White cedar. That was the best lumber. After the boat was finished it worked the water between Statia, St. Kitts, and St. Maarten. Bringin' supplies. We had a crew. I was one of the crew. And the fellow Dunkirk, he had a good many boys. They was all crew. And my uncle, he was captain. Yes. Good seaman.[101]

So the capable crew brought badly needed supplies to Statia:

Yes. Off and on, off and on, off and on. And when I got work, I say I ain't goin'. The problem was that we hired out the boat to somebody else. And we had a little fallin' out. The fellow went, he brought a fellow from Anguilla, as captain of it. The Anguilla fellow brought his crew. They fixed her up and they went south with her. Up around Antigua and Dominica. And we didn't hear nothing about them for six months. After six months the fellow come back, he brought a' couple a' hundred dollars. English money wasn't much at that time and it started to go down. And when he showed the fellow the money he brought, he said: 'Oh man, you done a good job. You can go with her.' Then, they go again, and after going again, a second time, he came back, brought a couple a' hundred dollars and he went with

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[99]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 22 August 1985.

[100]Ibid.

[101]Ibid.

her a third time, took a hundred bags a' sugar in the cabin to carry it to Antigua and say that she got sunk on the way over. That was after the war. In the investigation, they said that it didn't sink, but that they steal her. Stole her.[102]

Because of this situation, Elridge built a second boat, alone, in 1954. Although he has been asked, he has not built or helped to build another boat on St. Eustatius.

I was sick bad in the forties. I had a cold. I had an attack of what you call pleurisy, in my side. A cold. Got wet that day, wet clothes on and took cold. I was workin' all about, night and day. Lay down and got wet. I keep wet clothes on. You know? Got an attack of it in my side, doing the carpentry work, keepin' the wet clothes and things on, sweat and then I got wet with rain. I was young and strong. I didn't care. You see? I was strong, didn't have no care of it. I was sick about three months! Couldn't get out. The doctor help me well. He work with me. I recovered it. Oh man, I was shaky.[103]

When Elridge recovered from his illness, he was anxious to return to his carpentry job with the government. He was appointed to do "bench work" (i.e. light carpentry work and coffin building):

Around 1948 when boys schooled in carpentry were returning from places like Curacao and Aruba, Mr. Lopes (the government's deputy at that time) was sending them to me to get practical work and experience. But I was doing benchwork at the time. In the meantime old Mr. Hooker was working in "the field" (i.e. that Mr. Hooker was engaged in large scale construction such as house building). Mr. Hooker said that Mr. Lopes should have been sending the young boys to the field, and not to me. He said that because young boys can learn more out in the field.[104]

Mr. Lijfrock interjected by saying that boys involved in house

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[102]Ibid.

[103]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 11 August 1985.

[104]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 16 August 1985.

building would have the advantage of doing both large scale construction and light benchwork. He went on to say that it is good for a worker to have knowledge and skill in several job areas. He pointed out that while working in the machine shop of Shell Oil in Curacao, he continually strove to add new work experience to his employment background.

"It is good to know how to do many different things,"[105] Elridge added. "You will always have work. When I was a young man I learned house building, coffinmaking, and even shipwright work. I agreed with Mr. Hooker that the boys should have went to the field."[106]

This conversation is an interesting one because it alludes to a breakdown in traditional methods of education and learning and shows the first instances of governmental control being substituted for family and artisan/craftsman control. Thus, here we can mark the beginning of what Elridge calls the days of the "political government" (a government ruled by politicians of the local community, under the direction of, and receiving funding from Curacao), and the end of the period of "colonial government" (a government ruled by and funded directly from Holland)--the period of life in which he was raised:

Easy money-political money! The easy money started comin' since 1954. Yea, political liberty of freedom. Liberty, political since then. All the way different! The crown gave them their own authority so that they do what they want. They elect who they

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[105]Ibid.

[106]Ibid.

want to be representatives and when the representatives get there--to get back for the next four years' term again, they feel they owe you with money--they buy your votes. A favor. You see? If you got a family and a home that got a good many children--girls and boys at the age of twenty-one and can vote, they promise you that they are going to give them a job. They're goin' do this for them and they're goin' do the other for them. When they get in power some get good and some win and get good and some, the other side, catch hell! But in the United States, as far as I see on the television, it's far different. Because whether the people get the man in government they want, they are interested to work! You can't promise. Well, these small countries, they promise you! You got to live up to your word![107]

Thus, before "political days," in the "colonial days," "the government would not help you, you had to help yourself." [108]

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[107]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 13 August 1985.

[108]Ibid.

### CHAPTER III

#### FAMILY, WORK, AND COMMUNITY, 1954-85

Elridge was baptised and married as an Anglican, but has always attended Methodist church with his mother and sisters. There is no Anglican Church on Statia. However, Elridge says the Anglican congregation did maintain church services in a small house on the island. Elridge ceased to be a practicing Anglican around 20 years ago (c. 1965). This is also about the same time that his wife, Alberta, became a Seventh Day Adventist, something which he won't do.

On February 13, 1954, Elridge and Alberta Maynard of Nevis were married. When the couple agreed to get married, they could only be "half-married" at first:

Half-married means that you marry someone and that got to rest there for two weeks. They have to find out if you wasn't married already and that and so on, and she wasn't married already, and all the rest. They go to make a whole investigation. That's the law. They make a public disclosure, and stick it up. If you got married and you're divorced, and all a' that.[109]

Only then would others, with any legal claims to be settled against either Elridge or Alberta, have the chance to present their cases in regards to inter-personal relationships, offspring, or debts. As Elridge and Joyce Landsmark had already legally registered their children as Timbers, there could be no arguments as to which family members Elridge intended to recognize legally:

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[109]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 23 August 1985.



I asked her (Alberta) if she had all the papers, and (if) she was lawfully born and so on. She was lawfully born too. After we made two weeks public (thus, this is the period of being "half married"), they have witnesses to them and sign up and then they ask what date do we want to be married. And we done so, we got married.[110]

Elridge had a cousin, an Anglican priest from Saba, perform the marriage ceremony. "He spent two days here. He stayed down there in the Guesthouse. We all pay something."[111] The wedding party "lasted from 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon 'till ten o'clock at night. About a dozen people. Her mother was old, couldn't come. Her sister came."[112]

Elridge had first met his wife on Statia in the 1940s. "Yes, after the same time this other girl (Joyce Landsmark) went."[113] However, Alberta also left to find work on Curacao:

Yea, she went down to Curacao too. She was down there. She was a worker down there. They used to send for people from the British Islands and brought them here for different Dutch people down there. Someone for the home. Somebody would choice them. Send up here, then they would choice the person. They would be here, livin' on Statia. She was here workin', plant the ground, she would wash for people, this and that and the other. Take care of weedin' of the grounds. Then she get an opportunity and she went down. She was livin' indoors with the people that send for her, were responsible for her.[114]

But this work situation was not to be permanent:

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[110]Ibid.

[111]Ibid.

[112]Ibid.

[113]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 16 August 1985.

[114]Ibid.



She and the lady there had some fallin' out. A disagreement. So she went back home. When she left there, she went straight up. They had boats come from Curacao, Aruba, right up the islands. Right up to Nevis. After she get home, she met me, she come over to St. Kitts. I tell her to come here, before she went home. I knew her before she went away. We used to correspond (the couple had corresponded for about three years).[115]

Elridge met up with Alberta by joining a fishing boat on Statia bound for St. Kitts:

Yea, I go fishin'. A man wanted somebody to work with him. He had a fellow, but the fellow couldn't pull the oars. The fellow introduced him to me, on the bay. 'This fellow is a good man.' I started workin'. Hard, hard men--it was tough. I said: 'I'd be glad to join you.' He used to go to St. Kitts every weekend. Bring supplies and everything. So I happened to catch up with her. I ask her. I say: 'I may be back up next week.' I went back to where she was livin' and had a talk and so on. She said: 'I got a sister livin' down on Statia.' I said: 'I know.' She's got a sister here, she's all in with them. I told her sister to come down. She had some things up there, and the fellow send them down on the boat. I look for a house, I made all the preparations. She came and we got half-married.[116]

On January 3, 1985, Alberta celebrated her sixty-sixth birthday. Her son, Peter Maynard, was born before she met and married Elridge. Peter, a taxi driver on St. Maarten, resides at Point Blanche, and is 43 years old. He is married and has one son age 7, and two daughters--ages 12 and 15. These children visit Elridge and Alberta on St. Eustatius when school is not in session.

The land that Elridge and Alberta live on is "inheritance" land from the family. "Well, I didn't buy that, I come meetin' it here

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[115]Ibid.

[116]Ibid.

from my grandfather. Yea, inheritance land. Yea, I got that. I got it from my grandfather. I got that land around 1956." [117] Elridge says he received the land because he built the coffins of his grandfather and his uncle: "So I got the land." [118]

Both men had previously lived in the house that is above the dwelling that the couple presently reside in. Elridge's grandfather, Henry Milton Timber, probably lived there until the early 1930s and his uncle would have lived on the same land from that time until the early to mid fifties. Today, Elridge uses this structure to store a variety of items. Elridge built his house, a two room structure, in 1955. "Somewhere around '55, I started fram'in' it. Build it there (on the porch of the old school), then I set it up." [119] He framed it as is done in the "old English style." "I did it when I got home from work, in the afternoon, all by myself. When I set it up, then the boys come there and give me a hand." [120] The overall dimensions of this structure are 16' X 32'.

Alberta also worked on their new home. She did the painting:

Oh, she work hard. As soon as I finish something, she started painting. She paint the inside. When I built my house there, I built two rooms. And then I study on, get a bedroom and what you call a drawing room. I didn't have the money, but the wife still needed a place to cook. I took some drums and I cut them up, and bend them out on the concrete here. Hammered them with a big hammer and I went up in the mountain side and cut some mountain

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[117]Ibid.

[118]Ibid.

[119]Ibid.

[120]Ibid.





woods--an inch wide and eight feet long sticks. And some of them was the thickness of my fist. Cut out a square hole, that come out as a window, a door too. I cut everything out of drums.[121]

Elridge also made the roof out of these drums, but there was "no chimney."[122]

This kitchen, built from steel drums, was not meant to be permanent. As Elridge saved more money, he was able to purchase supplies that would allow him to build a more permanent structure:

I use it for about 4 or 5 months. And then after that I built from block. Concrete block. Every afternoon when I come from work, you build 30 blocks. Enough for a sack of cement. Yea, then after that I do another 120, then I had 240 blocks. Five hundred make a small kitchen. Added on to the two room house. I keep addin' on and addin' on. And after I come to the front, I attempted the front gate and the porch. And I add a room along with the porch. Just about a year after, well, I add on that afterward again. Make more room--the next bedroom.[123]

In the 1970s, Elridge made the outbuildings that are in his back yard. "I done that here since the seventies and then, after that, I build the oven. That was around '72." [124] Before that time Alberta used to bake the "old time way." "Yes, you fill a coal pot full of coals, big, iron pot full of coals and then you put big, flat bread in the pot and then you put a tin sheet on top and you put coals on top of that. Yes, you make a big, flat bread." [125]

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[121]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 11 August 1985.

[122]Ibid.

[123]Ibid.

[124]Ibid.

[125]Ibid.

Although Alberta cooks Elridge a big meal for dinner, at 4:00pm, he gets up by himself and prepares his own breakfast. As he did when he was a young child, he may drink some "bush tea" made from lime or mango leaves and eat a piece of bread with butter. He usually does not eat a noonday meal.

Elridge's days begin at dawn, and one can usually find him on the porch of the old school doing "benchwork." Carpentry work is a daily activity for him. Although he has only a few power tools, his industrious work ethics allow him to accomplish much without help from others. Elridge realizes that his attitudes toward work are different than those of Statia's youth today:

I depend on myself! Prepare for myself and my sisters and my wife. I ain't interested in them (youths)--they ain't interested! Why should I be interested? They don't come here. They only come here from wantin' from the government--sharin'. Get a job, sports and this, that, and the other. I ain't humbuggin' with them. Stop and go and look for one of the boys, a tall fellow, he plays football. (He) Come down here to help me and to put on the cloth on it. When he knock off I tell him here he must come. He rarely come. It came six o'clock he tell me he must--he think he have to go because he got to go for football study. But we were finished, we just the screws to put on. I tell him leave them up to me, I'll put them in the next mornin'. The next mornin', when I put the screws in, the truck come, and myself and the truck took him (the coffin) to the hospital--the public worker foreman, with his own truck. I had a public works truck, a small truck, myself and he take it down from the truck and put it in the hospital. (We) Took it from out of there and put it in the room inside there. (This is all) Foolish because in my days a boy would have to run behind people to get to do something. They have all sorts of trade schools, but what's the use of havin' them. Have you been to the one they got there? All sorts of machines they got up there. All sorts of lathes and everything. They had a German fellow teachin' them. He had to clear out.[126]

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[126]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 9 June 1985.



Elridge attributes many of Statia's problems to society's dependence on the government. As stated earlier, this dependence seems to have started when the "easy" or "political money" came in the 1950s. Elridge's opinion is that people should be less concerned about the government providing for them and get on to the business of providing for themselves. "The government must do this and government must do the other, but you ain't seen none of them to come here to ask a question of what's going on, they ain't interested to learn nothing! They make a mock of you." [127]

Elridge worries "that they got to bring in everybody here to find out this and find out the other, when Statia (people) can find out for themselves." [128]

Today, Elridge sees a great decline in the traditional apprenticeship system in the field of carpentry:

See how it is here, you don't see no boys come around here! Quiet. Very seldom you see a boy come around here. I saw one pass by the school there. He went to trade school in Curacao. Came from the trade school and he goes around here smokin' dope, usin' dope! They ain't interested. They're just interested in smokin' the dope! And all the rest...or sell it. They're just happy...crazy. The government lock them up...for ten days. Then they let them go again. They go and do the same thing! Just bad boys. They don't want to learn nothin'. They don't want to do nothin'. They get the easy money! And they send them to school. And when they go to school, some of them, they, in these last days now, they don't spend no time! They just follow around idle, they just smoke up the dope. They don't get so popular. (In this context, the word popular refers to being accepted by the community as a skilled craftsman.) Here's a small place and it all through the place here! Some of them come speak to me and

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[127]Ibid.

[128]Ibid.



they are crazy! [129]

I had a young fellow here with me. He went to Curacao. He was reared in Aruba. His mother brought him here in 1971. Brought him here to me. He's a cousin to me too! Both she and me. She says: 'I want this boy to work with you. I want him to learn something, not to be on the road.' I was very glad. His uncle was a mechanic here and he worked with me here, with another fellow training. I trained with him. After he had a year, nice boy, he didn't know how to sharpen a saw! I teach him how to do it! When he came here he couldn't cut a piece a' wood! I had to show him how to cut it and put it in the vise there and cut. This way. That way. After he was here a year, doing good. He get two years, better yet. I tell him one day, well now you can be on your own. I went to speak to the government so they give him something. Pay. They were only givin' him about seven guilders a day. You know what seven guilders is in our money? Seven guilders is about two dollars and eighty cents. And he was satisfied because he was anxious to learn. Learning the rule. Measurements. All of this work. Everything. Anyway, we had an accident here. There was four deaths. Four deaths at one time (1981). They got drown on the wharf. Went over in a car. The car fell over. They went off the big pier down there and they got drowned. Come to me and say: 'Man, a lot of trouble--we got four coffins to build. I don't know how we'll get through with them. You got to come out and work.' 'Well, no, I ain't got to come out to work because I am retired!' He said: 'Well, anyway you got to come show us something,'--he and the same other fellow they call Junie. So he came too and I said: 'Ok, I'll come down to show you boys what to do.' I came down in the afternoon and line them up and I leave them and they went through and they build the four coffins in the evening. They started at eight o'clock in the evening and six o'clock in the morning they had the four of them done. Cover them and everything. They were right there stretched out. And he's going on through the years and I took him with me afterwards to work on a house, and he's marchin' on. We had elections in the year '81. I think it was or '83...he starts smokin' up this dope. And he leaves. He ain't workin' no more.

Now, now he don't work at all! He don't want to see you to work. He bought a car and all! Through workin' and savin' money he bought a car. He used to put the tools in it and go around.

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[129]Ibid.



MEMORY OF  
FRIEND HOOK  
JULY 24 1955  
BUT NOT FORGOTTEN  
BY ALL HIS LOVED ONES

Now he's done with work! He's married too! The young boy he's married and all that. He had to leave home. (This man's wife has a daughter which she and her family support.) Nice boy. He fixed up bicycles. He could do all sorts of things and he was very ambitious and everything, but it was just the dope! Messed him up! I promised to go and see him. He lives in the village they call the Golden Rock Village. Over there. He lives over there, one of them. His wife had to leave--back to her parents (but this wife still gives her husband money). The doctor say he not crazy, (it's) just the dope! He don't have no money, because he's working with nobody! Had a car, a nice car in the yard there. The bank seize the car. They took it from him. He couldn't pay on it. Good boy. Now if he was here I wouldn't have no worry tellin' you nothing or showing you nothing. He know. He know the whole thing.!

That boy, he is a nice boy...but the dope mess him up. He left tools here! I had to pick them up and put them all there in that box for him. Get them over there by his wife there-'Take your tools.' Money that he worked for, from the government, he use up. He wouldn't go for it. Don't want to see the government no more. He say: 'No man, I ain't humbuggin' with them. They treat me wrong. They do me bad.' But they didn't do him nothin'! He was his own boss! Junie was runnin' part of the boys and he was runnin' the other part of them. Runnin' the boys.[130]

This story about the young apprentice has, of course, less to do with the people that get the "easy money" from the government, but, I believe, much to do with those that are on the side of the losing political party, or those "that catch hell." In asking questions of informants, I am of the opinion that when the elections came about, this particular young man was on the losing side and, therefore, there may have been some alteration in his "political job" after the elections. As we have seen, Elridge argues that this is not so: "But they didn't do him nothin'! He was

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[130]Ibid.

his own boss! Junie was runnin' part of the boys and he was runnin' the other part of them." [131] However, we do have the young man's statment: "No man-I ain't humbuggin' with them. They treat me wrong. They do me bad." [132]

Thus, it is not clear as to what caused the demise of this promising youth. What is clear is Elridge's frustration over the situation. The wasted time spent in training and preparation, as well as a "nice boy" turning to drugs. Also, in a way, Elridge failed in what he set out to do, that is--ultimately--to keep the boy off the streets and not idle. This was one of the reasons that the boy's mother brought her son to Elridge in the first place, so that he could have a role model and professional teacher.

In my conversations with Elridge he emphasizes that the drugs "messed him up." It is difficult to extend these conversations as to why the boy turned to drugs:

Kulesa: "So why do you think he turned to the dope? Why did he let the dope come into his life?"

Timber: "Just company."

Kulesa: "Company?"

Timber: "Yea."

Kulesa: "He was lonely?"

Timber: "Yea. He's married too! (but had to leave home)" [133]

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[131]Ibid.

[132]Ibid.

[133]Ibid.

Therefore, did the drugs cause the boy's demise, as Elridge asserts, or, was it an effect of it?

## CHAPTER IV

### TODAY AND YESTERDAY: THE ANATOMY OF A COFFINMAKER, 1924-85

The previous chapter's information on the comparison of Elridge's work attitude with the way he sees Statia's youth today, is interesting because it gives us insight into several areas of his life. Among these are his childhood experiences in learning to make a coffin, the apprenticeship system under which he worked, and the importance with which he sees his duties being carried out. His criticisms of today's youth allow us to explore what might be considered the norm for living and working, as a carpenter/coffinmaker, at an earlier time on Statia. As alluded to earlier, the 1971 apprenticeship was the most recent I could document as being practiced by Elridge:

I had a young fellow here with me. He went to Curacao. He was reared in Aruba. His mother brought him here in 1971. Brought him here to me. He's a cousin to me too! Both she and me. She says: 'I want this boy to work with you. I want him to learn something-not to be on the road.' [134]

This practice of a mother intervening for her son is a pattern which we see in Elridge's youth--the beginning of his apprenticeship:

Elridge, unlike young men today, had to learn carpentry from experience, not in school. Elridge started carpentry with Robbins because his mother thought it was best. She asked

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[134]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 9 June 1985.

Mr. Robbins to take her only son on as an apprentice. 'She was acquainted with him. She know that he was very popular.' Robbins was also a friend of one of Elridge's uncles.[135]

Thus, from the two preceding paragraphs, we can make the following comparison between life on Statia in the first half of the 20th century, ("the colonial days") and life in the second half or the period of "the political days," known also as the days of the "easy money." As we have seen in both cases it is the mother who is intervening for her son in order that he will have a more promising future. Elridge has expressed his mother's sentiments on the subject: "It is best! It was best you learn something here-learn a little more-all the time you could continue your learning. The better off for work! If you don't help yourself, nobody will help you." [136] The mother who brought her son to Elridge said: "'I want this boy to work with you. I want him to learn something-not to be on the road.'" [137] Thus, both mothers are expressing a concern for their sons' future, and it is safe to say neither mother wanted her son to be idle.

But we do see fundamental differences between the two lifestyles. In Elridge's youth we see continuity of the family situation on Statia (except for the fact that his father left Statia in 1922), whereas in the case of the 1971 apprentice we are made

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 [135]C.J. Kulesa, "The Coffinmaker of St. Eustatius," (M.A. thesis, The College of William and Mary, 1989), p. 27-28.

[136]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 11 August 1985.

[137]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 9 June 1985.

aware that the boy was raised on Aruba and received schooling on Curacao. The move to Aruba, made by the boy's family, was an effort grasp job opportunities on that island. Thus, we find this boy, although studying to be a carpenter, does not share with Elridge, childhood experiences that relate to the trade. As previously mentioned, Elridge learned basic capentry skills early, at home, in the backyard, when a coffin had to be built. Elridge's young apprentice, however, shares none of these early developmental skills in the trade: "When he came here he couldn't cut a piece a' wood! I had to show him how to cut it..."[138]

Finally, by way of the 1981 and 1979 incidents, we are made aware of how Elridge views his responsibility toward the trade of coffinmaking. For example, in the 1981 incident the young man and Junie come to report the four victims who are in need of coffins:

'Man--a lot of trouble--we got four coffins to build. I don't know how we'll get through with them--you got to come out and work.' 'Well, no, I ain't got to come out to work because I am retired!' He said: 'Well, anyway, you got to come show us something.' 'OK, I'll come down to show you boys what to do.'[139]

It appears that this incident brought Elridge out of retirement; today, although he is selective as to which carpentry jobs he takes on, he remains as the coffinmaker of the island.

Thus, in my opinion, the young carpenters today have not fully grasped the responsibility of coffinmaking to the same degree that Elridge's generation maintained. For

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[138]Ibid.

[139]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 6 June 1985.



example, when Elridge was away in Curacao for two weeks in 1979, he turned over his coffinmaking responsibilities to his cousin, Daniel, and other tradesmen. As luck would have it, these men were faced with the task of building a coffin in his absence. The problem occurred when the coffin that these men built could not fit into the home of the deceased, for the viewing of the body. As a consequence, the body had to be carried from the home to be put into the coffin. Additionally, the cover would not fit properly, causing it to somewhat crush the body. This angered the family of the deceased, an anger which was extended to Elridge. When he returned to the island he said that he was ashamed at how "the boys" responded to the challenge. He said the reason for this disgraceful job was simply the men's fear of the Dead: they were "afraid of the dead body. They didn't check the size of the body." [140] Thus, Elridge has indicated that the men could have done a proper job--having the know-how and technology available to them.

This emphasizes coffinmaking, in Statian Society, is more than just a job that one does; it is a responsibility that fulfills an important community need. The coffinmaker not only has the skills and tools to accomplish the task; he has the personality to understand his role in this important rite of passage and the sensitivity to know what the family expects--an idea of what is right or proper.

I have discussed in some length how a young person becomes

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[140]Ibid.

oriented in the trade of carpentry, but we must continue to examine Elridge's life history in order to understand how the practice of coffinmaking has changed. Elridge describes his coffinmaking job today:

My job is specialized. Just before that anyone die, they (the family) come a day or two and tell me if they could get a coffin. 'Well, I leave it up to you--you get all the materials and (I'll) have it built.' Sometimes I may go and peep upon the person and see--qualify the size, and then I build the coffin in proportion. (I) measure them with a tape and I build them to proportion. Sometimes I order the wood. If they ask me, I order the wood and all a' everything. Then I make one charge. (Elridge does not mind ordering the supplies, but he does prefer that the family deliver or make arrangement to have supplies delivered to him. This is because, as he has no truck, it is difficult for him to get the supplies to his work shop. Transportation is an area in which he requires assistance.) [141]

Although coffinmaking has been described here as one of the duties of a carpenter, it seems that this connection may be much clearer in Elridge's mind than it is to young carpenters on the island. The 1981 incident is an indication of this; the cultural attitude that the population has toward Death, i.e. the fear of Death, would seem to strengthen this conclusion. Thus, I wish to argue that although Elridge sees his carpentry work as encompassing bench work, house building, and coffinmaking; clearly, coffinmaking has components which relate more readily to a doctor or undertaker--one who has an understanding of anatomy and Death. Since there are no undertakers on St. Eustatius, Elridge is the link between the family and their need to properly complete this rite of passage. The ability for a member of St. Eustatius society to fill this

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[141]Ibid.

role appears not to be one of a carpenter simply putting the wood together, but a person who does not fear Death, but understands the body, anatomy, Death, and who respects the family's situation in such an emergency in this important rite of passage in the society:

I don't have no fear! I have been doing this thing from a boy! Doing with Roda and going with my uncle and they. You mostly carry a twine and measure the length of the dead. Measure across the stomach here. Measure from the head to here (shoulder). So you see the person body is more wide...some time they're dead in this position (Elridge lifts his leg, raising his knee.) Well, you got to ask the Doctor to bring in the body. Some of them die with their foot cocked up. Cut muscle and then it bent back down.[142]

Thus, it seems that carpentry skills alone are not enough to make the qualified coffinmaker, rather it is the attitude toward Death that is important. When I asked Elridge if there were any men on the island that he thought could take his place he replied there was--Junie. (He's) "not afraid. Yea, he can handle the situation." [143] I then asked Elridge if most people were afraid of Death: "The don't like to mingle with the Dead." [144] So perhaps it is better to say that people may not necessarily be afraid of Death, rather, they fear the Dead. This would correspond to earlier times on the island when children were taught to fear jumbies--dead people.

This distinction between the fear of Death and actually fearing the Dead is important. It allows us to consider how a member of

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[142]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 6 June 1985.

[143]Ibid.

[144]Ibid.

Statian society, like Elridge, would evolve into the position of coffinmaker for the island, and why other, younger carpenters might not. I think it is clear from the previous discussions that the process of properly carrying out the duties of coffinmaker on St. Eustatius is best learned with respect to the traditional values and expectations of this society. The fact that Elridge began his role early in life, and carried on skills and knowledge of the position of coffinmaker, adds much to his credibility for families in need of his services. Thus, coffinmaking on St. Eustatius, although it is one of the jobs that a carpenter should know how to do, has never been just a job to Elridge, rather, it is a way of life and of service. This may best explain why younger carpenters have not properly carried on the tradition from Elridge. In the growth, development, and education of these young men, coffinmaking is a job, and usually it is a least desirable job that they do.

An illustration of this last statement was relayed to me by Elridge, as he was explaining an incident in which a local school teacher asked for information on coffinmaking as a subject which local school boys could study in the classroom. The emphasis, in the teacher's mind, was to be placed on coffin construction as a technique, not as a way of life, or a position in Statian society which satisfies a particular community need. Thus, the teacher saw no need to explain the function of the trade or Elridge's perspective on it, rather, it was just the technical details of a coffin pattern that the teacher wanted for his class:

I gave to the school over there that they got--small

boys--two years ago when it started--a pattern--took from here--(the teacher) he say gonna teach the boys. I told him to bring the boys in--I don't think the boys will take (learn) anything that way. 'I think if you bring the boys here while I'm workin'--they would take it more better.' He said: 'No man, give me the pattern--the measurements and everything, and I'll teach it to them over there.' But he never got through with it! He wouldn't take my advice--I tell him: 'Bring the boys here to spend a few hours--spend an afternoon there from the school.' He said: 'Oh wait, I don't want to build no coffin, I don't want to see no coffin!' They never came. If you teach them over there they won't understand it. You must come here with me. You can't understand it if you won't take no time. He didn't take no time with it.[145]

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[145]Ibid.

CHAPTER V  
COFFIN CONSTRUCTION

This part of the study is concerned with how a coffin is constructed. Notes for this section follow the procedure when a "casket coffin" (see Chapter VI) was built by Elridge and his helper Julian Boss. It was made for Mr. Theodore Dinzy who had died from a cancerous brain tumor in June 1985, at the age of 52.

The two men first lay a 3/4", 4'X8' sheet of plywood on the work bench. Elridge prys a 21" "guide" from the ceiling. (This guide is used to determine the shoulder width of the coffin--it is of Mr. Dinzy's size). With the mark of the 21" from the edge of one length of the plywood, a 21" wide section is sawed from the main body of the plywood sheet (this will serve as the bottom of the coffin--page 69).

Next, a 13 1/4" line, parallel to the edge of this larger remaining sheet, is marked off and cut. This divides the larger piece in half. All of this is removed from the table, and the 21" wide by 8' long piece is placed back on the table. Elridge now roughly determines the body length of Mr. Dinzy. A mark is made on the board at the 80" length, as this will allow for plenty of room for the deceased. With the use of a chalk line, a center line is now struck on this board. Thus, the 10 1/2" point is marked and connected at both ends of the board.



This board is being prepared to be the bottom of the coffin. Elridge is now visualizing where the "breaks" will appear on this bottom piece. To do this, Mr. Dinzy must be measured from the shoulders up. Remember, the 21" mark can be found at the shoulders, the widest point of Mr. Dinzy's body (however, for some people, such as women, this may be at the hips). For a "comfort" fit, Elridge determines that the cut off line must come 14 1/2" from the break. Both ends of this style of coffin will be symmetrical (one of the main attributes of the "casket coffin"). Although the coffin will be pointed at each end, a 9" width will be left for the head and feet. All measuring begins at one edge of the wood. The cutting along all of these lines now leaves the coffin in its visualized shape.

Work is then prepared to construct the ends of the coffin--the "head" and "foot." Because Elridge wants a finished end to measure 9", he cuts at the 1/4" mark greater than this figure. The "head" and "foot" pieces are now nailed flush to the bottom of the coffin (page 71). With these attached, the coffin is lifted, turned on its side, and tacked to the side of the work bench (two nails are nailed through the bottom of the coffin, into the side of the work bench).

Next the edges of the head and foot boards have to be planed so that the sides of the coffin will correspond. Planing is a gradual process with a scrap board being substituted for the sides in order to determine when flushness is achieved. The coffin bottom is now removed from the side of the bench and flipped over in order to plane the opposite edge of the head and foot. When all of this is





completed, the coffin shelf can be laid on the floor and the long "side" pieces can be brought to the work bench. With a side piece lying on the table, the coffin bottom is brought over it while being held on its side. This allows the coffinmaker to mark where the "breaks" will be located on the side board, exactly in conjunction with the breaks of the coffin bottom. Head and foot marks are only roughly indicated on the side board at this time.

The bottom can again be laid aside and the break marks are fully extend by pencil and rule or by the chalk line. These break lines are continued totally around each side board, including the edge widths. The coffinmaker now incises the lines, on only one side (usually the side with the best finish), with four to six backward and forward motions of the hand saw. After incising almost 1/2" of the thickness of the side board, four nails are driven above this break line (i.e. the area going toward the head or foot). These two inch steel nails, although nailed into the top of the work bench, are not pounded all the way down, but bent at the half way point (this facilitates their easy removal).

Now that the incisions have been made, the break can now be "turned." Turning the break involves a series of successive lifts and incisions that bring the break to its proper angle. This allows the side to be properly articulated with the bottom of the coffin. At the extreme end of the side board (away from the end which is nailed down) a carpenter's plane is placed just under the edge (page 73). This short lift causes a slight tension at the break. A forward and backward motion of the hand saw creates an incision that



relaxes this tension. Thus, the board is lifted slightly higher and the plane is moved farther under the board. This process occurs about 3 or 4 times per break made for each side. As a rule of thumb, one can say the break is at a sufficient angle when the plane has continued movement up to about 6" away from the break (page 75).

Without removing the first four nails, four more nails are hammered in place to turn the second break. The process of turning this second break is the same as the first. When completed, all eight nails are pulled at once.

The coffin bottom is now returned to the side of the workbench and is "tacked" in place by several nails (page 76). The incisions of the side board are cleared of sawdust and a bead of glue is allowed to flow in (page 77). With one of the sides of the coffin bottom facing up, the coffinmaker now lays the side board in place. When in place, the "side" can now be nailed to the bottom, head, and foot, of the coffin. The coffin now begins to take a recognizable shape.

"Toenails" are used to help bind the side board at the break lines. Three nails are placed here. Toenails are driven sideways, into the break, from opposite directions, and help to hold the desired angle of the break. Elridge places the toenails more toward the bottom of the coffin, as later, the top will be trimmed to fit the gabled lid. The edges where the turn occurs at the break are now planed to have a smooth face.

The coffin is removed and rotated, and the completed side of the coffin is placed on the side of the workbench. The second side is completed in the same way as the first (page 78). After the











second side is nailed to the coffin, the ends of both side boards, protruding from the head and foot, can be trimmed. This is done with the hand saw. Light planing smooths out all the edges.

The coffinmaker now turns his attention toward the "head" board in order to create the "roof-like" angle that will define the pitch of the gabled lid. The first step in this process is to draw a straight line across the top of the head board that allows for the "comfortable" depth of the coffin. Not allowing enough depth for the coffin will cause the lid to crush the deceased. The next step is the same for every gabled lid coffin that Elridge builds: COME UP ONE INCH FROM THIS LINE (or use the thickness measurement of the type of board you are using) and make a mark in the center of this width of the head board. This mark will be the maximum height and the top and middle of the gabled lid. From this center point will be the two lines which are drawn to indicate where the two sides of the gabled lid are to be placed. These lines are drawn to meet the straight line that was first drawn on the head board.

As we view the pencil drawn lines on the head board we see that the coffinmaker has essentially drawn an isosceles triangle. The two equal sides of the triangle define the pitch of the lid of the coffin (page 80).

At this time straight-edged scrap boards are nailed just below these lines (page 81). One side is done at a time. Along one side of the coffin, the chalk line is tied to each end of the scrap boards. Before being securely tied to each end, it is made certain that the line just barely touches the coffin side. Once tied, the chalk





line is "struck." Areas not marked by the chalk are filled in by way of the carpenter's square and pencil.

This is done for both sides of the coffin, and then these marks serve as cutting lines for the saw. Although Elridge has always used a hand saw for this type of work, he does find it much easier to cut plywood with a circular saw.

After all cuts are finished, they are made smooth by planing. The coffin is now laid aside and a second 4' X 8' sheet of plywood is brought to the work bench. The two top lid halves are measured and cut from this sheet. The coffinmaker brings them together on the coffin and estimates the bevel to cut them so that they will fit smoothly together at their edges (page 83). With this accomplished, one half can be tacked down on the coffin. Wood glue is flowed along the exposed bevel. The second half is now joined with the first, and is tacked into position. Eleven toenails are placed along the top of the lid, near the beveled center. Pencil marks are made underneath the lid, along the side of the coffin, to mark cut lines so that the lid will conform to the coffin's shape.

The lid is now removed from the coffin and an additional bead of glue and sawdust is rubbed into the interior center line. The lid is now laid top down on the bench and the pencil lines made earlier serve as the cutting guides to trim waste from the lid (page 84).

The coffinmaker can now reinstall the lid and plane the entire coffin smooth at all edges. The coffin surface is also thoroughly sanded at this time. The coffin is now ready to receive its cloth covering.





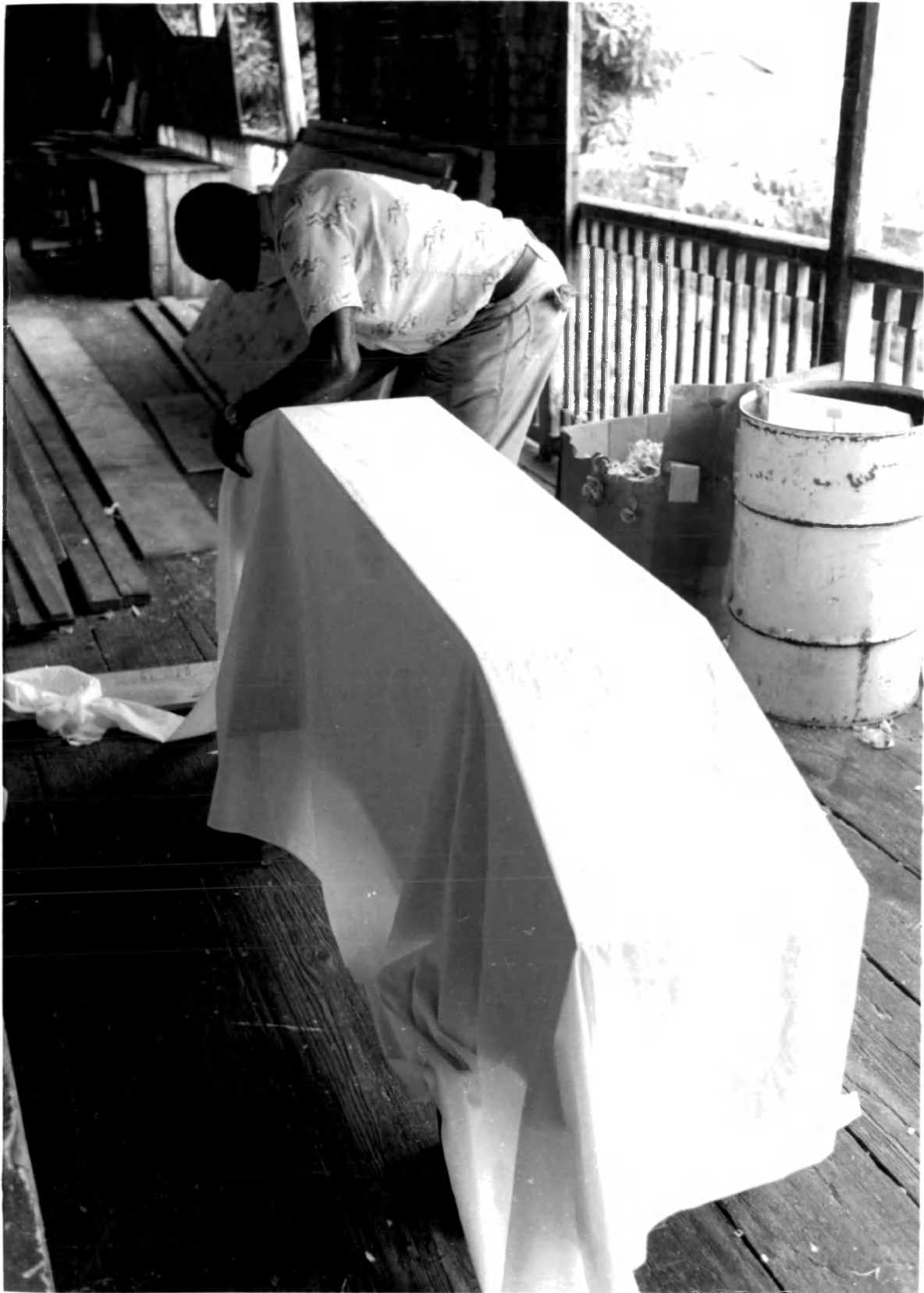
To cover the coffin with cloth, the cloth must first be cut. The piece for the inside bottom of the coffin is actually cut to conform to the outside base of the coffin. The coffinmaker does this by placing the coffin upside down on supports such as saw horses. The cloth is spread flat over the bottom and the edges are traced with a sharp razor knife (page 86 and page 87). The same is done for the interior sides of the coffin (page 88 and page 89). All of these pieces can then be stapled directly onto the wood (page 90). To prevent material waste, the cloth, just as the wood before, it is always brought edge to edge with the surface to be worked. Thus, cloth or wood is never cut from the center, outward, but started from an edge. This leaves additional material for the project not used, but in whole form until it is needed. Usually, the cloth that forms the interior lining of the coffin is white.

Putting the cloth on the exterior of the lid of the coffin is, perhaps, the most important and difficult task of covering the coffin. This surface must appear very taut and smooth, with no visible seams or staples. To achieve this look, the cloth is laid out flat on the table. The top of the lid is placed down flat on this cloth. One edge of the cloth is brought over the inside edge of the lid and stapled. Additionally, at the edge of the lid, the coffinmaker installs a second linear row of staples. All of these staples secure the cloth firmly to the inside of the coffin lid. This is important because, for a tight fit, the cloth must be pulled tightly from the outer edge of the inside lid and over the top of the exterior to the opposite interior edge of the lid. Only under

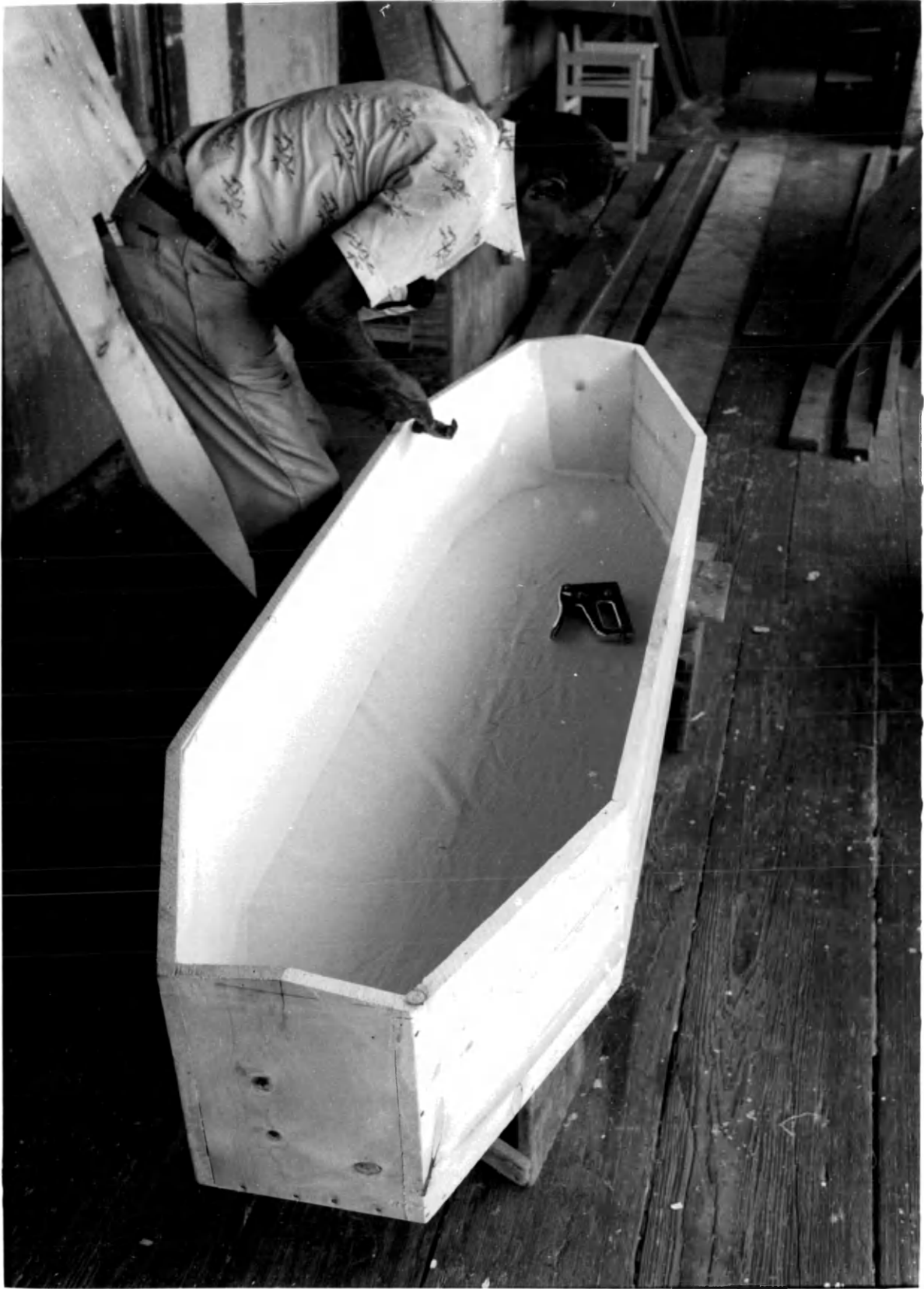










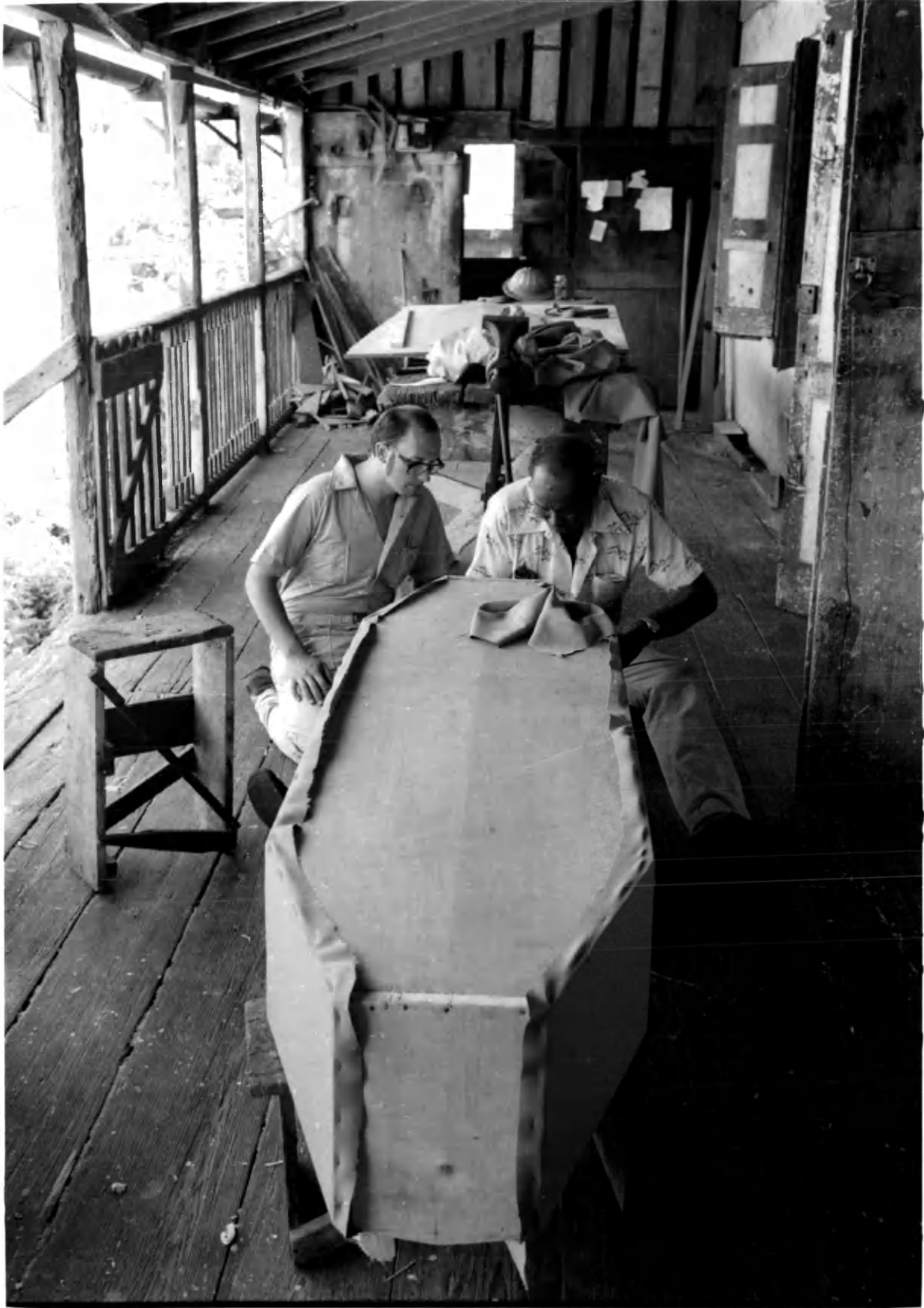


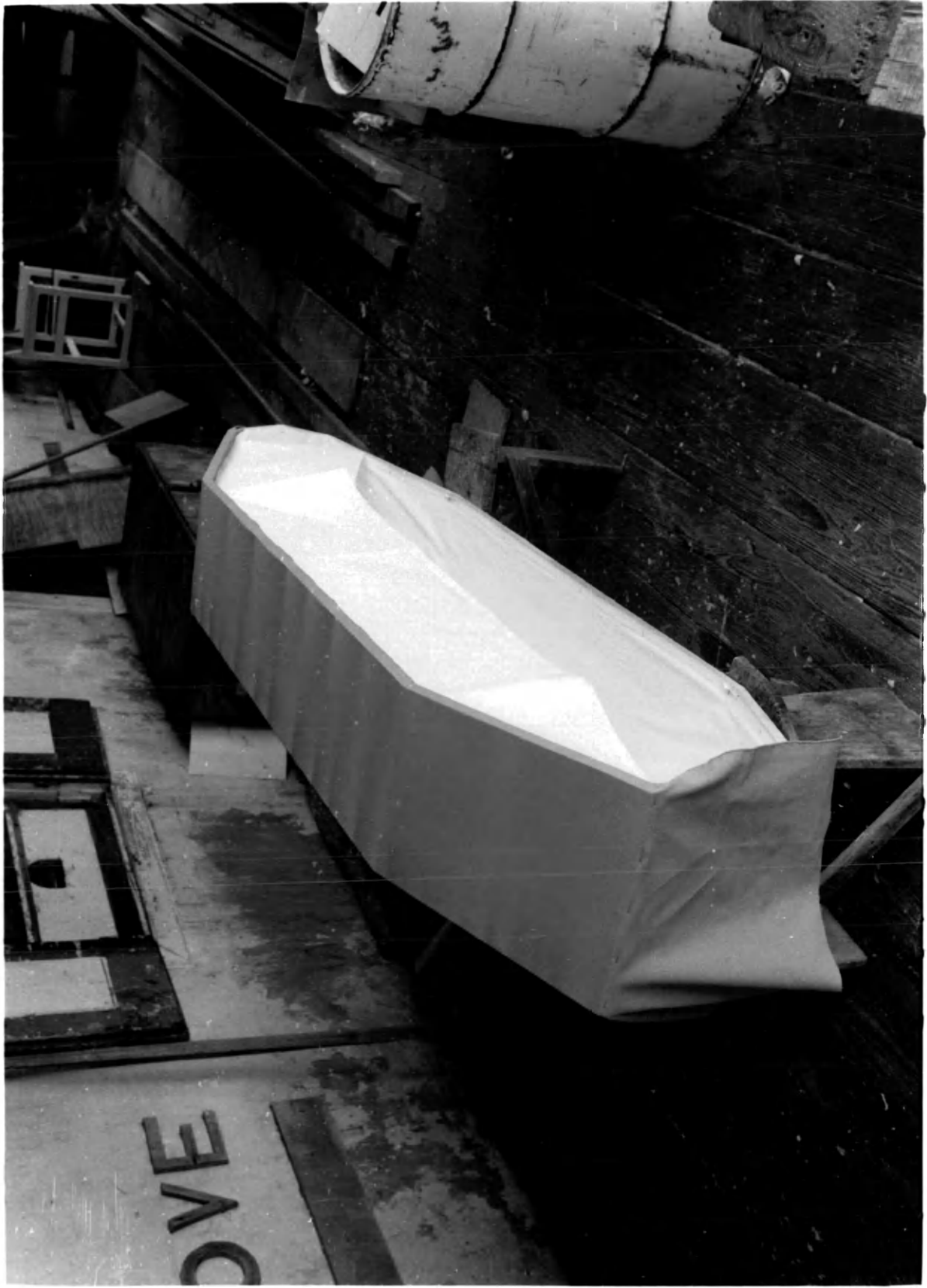
this stress can it be stapled securely to the interior of the lid (page 92).

The outer sides of the coffin are not traced as those of the interior lining; rather, they, as the lid, must also appear tight and smooth. To achieve this the cloth must be first piled inside the coffin from head to foot in an even fashion. One long edge of the cloth is then raised and stapled, in a linear fashion, along the inside rim, near the top of the side board. Once fully stapled along this edge, the rest of the cloth can be lifted out of the coffin bottom and dropped over the side. It is then pulled tight and stapled to the bottom of the coffin, giving the appearance of a smooth surface, free of wrinkles. This process is repeated for the other side as well (page 93).

The exterior of the head and foot board, because of the pointed gable atop these boards, requires a different approach to covering. In this case the cloth is stapled to either the right or left edge and is then pulled tightly to the opposite edge for stapling. Thus, the tension is mainly horizontal here as opposed to vertical for the side boards. The upper remaining cloth of the head and foot can then be folded over the gable to form a smart appearance. The exterior cloth can be any choice of the family or coffinmaker, or even a request of the deceased. It is usually a different color than the white that is chosen to serve as the interior lining (page 94).









## CHAPTER VI

### COFFIN TYPOLOGY AND THE AREA AND DIRECTION OF ECONOMIC CHANGE, c.1863-1985

In the previous chapter, attention focused on only one of the coffin styles that Elridge makes. In reality there are four main coffin types that he builds or has built in his career. These are: "the box," "the old colonial style," "the tray lid," and "the casket coffin." "The box," "the old colonial style," and "the casket coffin" may be constructed with a flat or a gabled lid. My studies indicate that Elridge has consistently built more gabled lid coffins. He has reported that the British islands, such as St. Kitts, build flat lid coffins.

"The box" style is considered by Elridge to be a quickly constructed, temporary container in which the body can be kept until the family authorizes what burial arrangements are to be made. "The box" style is just what the name suggests, it is rectangular in shape, but the width dimension at the "foot" being less than that at the "head"--the overall shape roughly conforms to the shape of the body (a wedge shape) with more width needed at the shoulders and less at the feet.

This type of coffin was built by Elridge, in an emergency, for an American man who had "dropped dead" on Statia's football field. The man was not from the island and authorities contacted the family in regard to having the body sent home. As Elridge was told the

family was making arrangements for the purchase of a commercial casket, he only devoted enough time to build the simplest coffin style--"the box" style--so that the body could be properly transported locally to and from the cold storage building.

The next style coffin in terms of the complexity of construction is that of "the old colonial style." This is the earliest type of coffin construction known, as ascertained from oral history interviews with Elridge. He assigns the origin of this type to the English islands, in particular, Bermuda. Interviews indicate this style was popular from the second-half of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century (page 97).

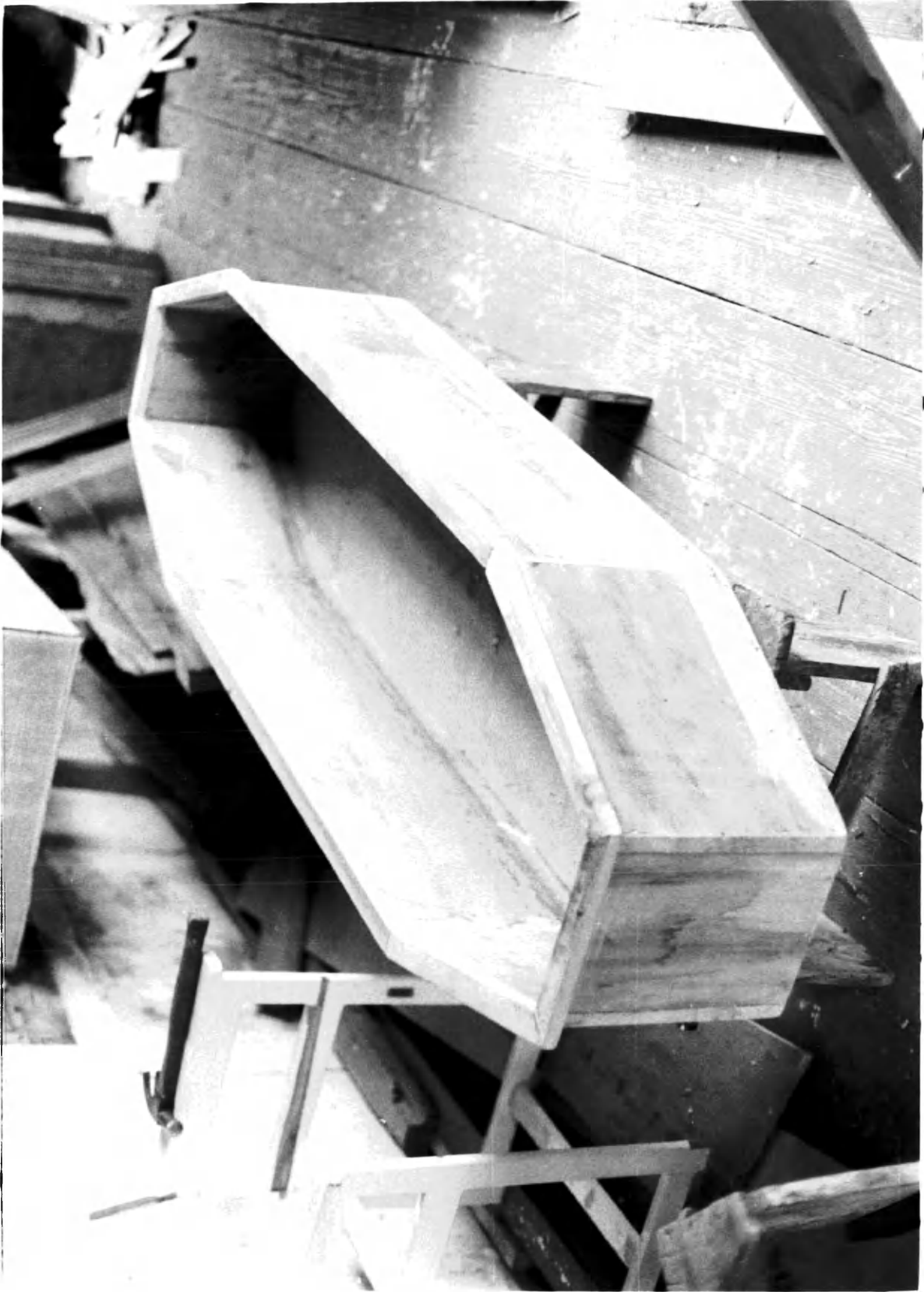
The third coffin style appears to take its inspiration from the island of Curacao, and has been reported as having being started to be built on Statia in the 1930s. This is the only coffin that is associated with a specific lid--"the tray lid." "The tray lid" requires more construction detail than a regular or flat lid and seems to have been popular on St. Eustatius from before World War II to about c. 1980 (page 98).

The most recent coffin style on the island takes its origin from contemporary metal caskets purchased by some Statians and seen by many others on the neighboring island of St. Maarten. This coffin is the product of the 1980s, and during my fieldwork, appeared to have the most public appeal. It is called "the casket coffin" (page 99).

In my discussions with Elridge, it appears that "the box" coffin has always been constructed on St. Eustatius, through all time periods, whenever there is a need for a quick, easily built,







and relatively inexpensive coffin. However, studies of the last three coffin types indicate that they may indeed be linked to periods of economic change on the island, as the formation of the ideas that led to their construction and use by Statians took inspiration from the new regions of economic change. Thus, an analysis of "the old colonial style," "the tray lid," and "the casket coffin" allows us to consider material culture change with respect to economic change on the island.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, "the old colonial style" is associated with influence from Bermuda and dates from the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In considering this earliest type of coffin style, I asked why Statians left their island to go to British islands such as Bermuda. Elridge told me the answer was simple--they had to survive. This situation is quite clear in the literature:

After the abolition of slavery in 1863, a social change took place. The plantations were abandoned and the owners reduced to poverty. Their income came only from the little hired fields where the former slaves planted some yams and sweet potatoes, the main food of the population.

If it rained too little, then these root products had to be imported. That was done by the planters, who therefore became merchants, to whom the former slaves got indebted.

And so a society was created, whereby the slaves were promoted to free labourers, but in which the employers were lacking.[146]

Thus, Statians leaving for and returning from Bermuda did expand the area of exchange:

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[146]Dr. J. Hartog, History of St. Eustatius (Aruba: VAD, 1976), p. 128

My grandfather was good because he could draft out the boats, just the same as how you were sketchin' there--draftin'. He could draft them all out. He could make the sail. He could sail them. He could do everything with them. He would decide what he wanted to build before he start. And he had two boats he owned! Two boats--one was thirteen tons--the keel was twenty-five feet keel. The other one was thirty feet keel. He had two boats that I knew of. Two sloops. He was a carpenter himself. Go all over the islands. He go to St. Thomas, go to St. Thomas, go to St. Barts, go to Antigua, Dominica--all about...They was ten years over there. Some of them was six, seven, eight years in Bermuda...Bermuda used to cultivate all these potatoes and do a lot of building and stone work, with this Bermuda stone building, and a lot of them went over there to do it.[147]

This, in turn, affected coffinmaking: "They was working off all English ways. And that English way, it came down from Bermuda." [148]

Elridge has reported that "the tray lid" coffin comes from Curacao, and can be marked as arriving with a period of time just before the Second World War:

The thirties--then things started comin'--from the thirties...You got a little more experience a' life, and so on. You had the opportunity to go to Curacao and Aruba...You get an opportunity to go down there and get a little more education. Up to the forties St. Maarten wasn't no where neither. Up to the forties St. Maarten was still way back! Way back. Statia was better because we had sweet potatoes and yams and we were shippin' them to Curacao and Aruba. They had a lot of--hundreds and hundreds of people in there and nothin' was the same for them down there so the money would come back from there--Curacao to you and you would make use of it here for yourself.[149]

Hartog describes Statia as a "remittance economy" during this time period:

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[147]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 28 June 1985.

[148]Ibid.

[149]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 22 June 1985.

A few times already, mention has been made of the emigration of Windward Islanders who went to work at Aruba and Curacao in the oil refineries or elsewhere. This exodus began in 1925, reaching its peak in the thirties and continued until right after the Second World War. Because it was chiefly young men of the 25-40 years age-group who left the island, a strange demographical situation was created: the number of children and old people was abnormally large and, in addition there was an exceptionally large surplus of women. In 1931, for example, there were 331 men to 564 women. The Statians who went to work in Aruba and Curacao supported their families by remitting post office orders. In the long run this amount exceeded f. 100,000 per year, which is indeed an exorbitant amount for about a thousand inhabitants.[150]

As indicated earlier, "the casket coffin," a product of Statian society in the 1980s, was influenced from St. Maarten, by goods coming from Puerto Rico and the United States. Most people nowadays earn their money from the local government on St. Eustatius. This situation began in 1951, when Statia was granted political autonomy. Here Elridge talks of Statians' dependence on their government:

The government must do this and the government must do the other--but you ain't seen none of them to come here to ask a question of what's going on. They ain't interested to learn nothing! I depend on myself! Prepare for myself and my sisters and my wife. I ain't interested in them--they ain't interested! Why should I be interested? They don't come here--they only come here from wantin' from the government-sharin'. Get a job...sports and this, that, and the other. I ain't humbuggin' with them...[151]

Thus, just as internal economics on the island has changed, so has the sphere of economic influence from Curacao. Today, the rapid growth of St. Maarten has a greater effect on Statians:

Mostly, you get everything from Puerto Rico! Everything. Puerto Rico's got the biggest sale around the Antillies.

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[150]Dr. J. Hartog, History of St. Eustatius (Aruba: VAD, 1976), pp. 133-34.

[151]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 22 June 1985.



PUERTO RICO FUNERAL SUPPLY

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Everything you get from Puerto Rico. Yes! The biggest market for Puerto Rico is here on Statia. Food stuff and everything! Cold storage--everything from Puerto Rico. The boats go down there from St. Maarten...and all the islands...from Anguilla they bring the cargo up here (St. Maarten). By plane, all the cold storage comes in from Puerto Rico...by plane...chicken, meat, fish! Everything from Puerto Rico! Beds, furniture--Puerto Rico...Yea, Puerto Rico. We still get connections from Curacao, but you have to go all around--the ships leave from Curacao then come to St. Maarten--then they put it off at St. Maarten. Then you get Tex-Line ships--comes down from Miami--they bring it here to St. Maarten. Then, from St. Maarten, it comes over here.[152]

I asked Elridge why coffin styles change on St. Eustatius. The answer came when we were discussing the newest style coffin: "Most of them here on Statia, they want to be buried up-to-date. They want luxury. All the best. The best looking coffin, the best cloth, the best of dress to put on. A suit and all of those things." [153]

This is a significant observation because it helps to explain why coffin styles change, on the island, with respect to changes in the local economy and the direction of that change. Here we must understand that having the best in terms of funerary accoutrements is important to Stadians because Death represents a highly significant rite of passage. In fact, Death, according to Elridge, and others, appears to loom greater in importance for the Stadian population than Birth or Marriage.

It is hoped that the above analysis will provide information for archaeologists working on St. Eustatius. Additionally,

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[152]Interview with H.E. Timber, St. Eustatius, 9 June 1985.

[153]Ibid.

archaeological work will help to verify the oral history record presented here. Therefore, in this study of the coffinmaker of St. Eustatius, I have found that we may best make meaningful interpretations of this form of material culture, and quite possibly others, by analyzing it not only in the context of the local community, but also with respect to the direction and area of economic change.

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