

2007: SIR GEORGE F. HUGGINS (1869-1941)

In 1897 Trinidad was celebrating the Diamond Jubilee of the reign of Queen Victoria, in an age that was predominantly tranquil, yet industrially burgeoning; and participating in those celebrations was the young George Frederick Huggins who, just a year previously, had opened a one-door provision business on the west side of Almond Walk, now known as Broadway. Sandwiched between two taller and larger establishments, it was hardly more than a narrow room fronting on the street that was shaded by two rows of spreading almond trees. But, to the young man, who had only his strength and courage to assist him in his new venture, that drab little store was gilded by his implicit faith in the future.

Born in the island of St. Vincent, and originally destined for the Church, his first job had been on one of the Porte estates there and he learned early to love agriculture for its own sake. However, St. Vincent probably offered little or no opportunities for an ambitious youth and so he set out for Trinidad to win fame and fortune. His first job in the island was a minor clerical one at the Royal Gaol. Before six months had passed, Huggins knew that a life in the Civil Service was not for him, and he became an office-boy at Branch and Company, who were provision merchants, and the experience gained there led to the opening of his own small business. Although the first few months in his new venture could not have been easy ones, in less than a year he found it necessary to move to larger premises at No. 66, South Quay; and in 1898 he was joined in partnership by his brother-in-law, Evan Packer Hutchinson. The store was opened at 6.00 a.m., and he would often continue late into the afternoon, without a break for lunch.

At the turn of the century, the general economy of the island, save for the asphalt mined from the renowned Pitch Lake, was purely agricultural. By that time, cocoa, not sugar, had come to reign supreme. By 1906, when the first motorcars were

appearing on the streets of Port of Spain, George Frederick Huggins and Evan Packer Hutchinson had established their business on firm foundations and, trading in cocoa, copra and sugar, they had started to acquire a direct interest in the land itself. The very first such venture took the form of a lease on the thriving coconut groves of El Cocal on the east coast, a property that they eventually bought outright; and when the firm of Burnley liquidated its holdings, Paradise and an adjoining estate in the Tacarigua district were purchased. In 1912, the firm of George F. Huggins & Co. opened a branch office in San Fernando, and gradually the business of the firm was diversified, in keeping as it were with the general development of the island.

1914 marked the end of an era in Trinidad: one in which its economy had been tied directly to the land. Almost overnight, the strategic position of Port of Spain, as a crossroad of world shipping routes became paramount, and the winning of oil from fields in the southern part of the island became of prime importance. The immense demands that World War 1 made on all resources throughout the Commonwealth inevitably affected life in the island. Sugar prices rose; food was at times more precious than gold; the volume of shipping passing through the Gulf of Paria increased tremendously; many young Trinidadians left to fight with the Allies in Europe and the Middle East; while the older men who remained behind worked night and day to keep the affairs of the island on an even keel, to send as much agricultural produce and oil abroad as was possible. Engaged in stevedoring and representing great shipping interests, and an importer and exporter of produce and other supplies vital to consumers in the Colony and overseas, George F. Huggins & Co. made its presence felt throughout the society. George Huggins, himself, led the way in raising Merchants' Contingents of young West Indians who were eager to fight in Europe. He made direct donations in cash towards the war ends, and he spent what time he could in England organizing, arranging and encouraging the

various contributions made by Trinidad and Tobago to Great Britain. Those many voluntary services were rewarded by his receiving **the O.B.E.**

However, in spite of the pressures of these war years, time was still found to attend to affairs at home. On 4th March, 1917, nineteen of Port of Spain's leading citizens, among them George F. Huggins, gathered to discuss plans for the founding of a newspaper, and three months later the Trinidad Publishing Company was incorporated. Premises were leased at No. 22 St. Vincent Street, and on Sunday 2nd September, 1917, the first issue of the Trinidad Guardian appeared. By the late 1920s, poor prices and the resultant dwindling of the cocoa crop caused Mr. Huggins to pioneer the citrus industry, and he became the first president of the fledgling Citrus Growers Association and one of its corner-stones. In 1937, in recognition of his many and varied services to the Colony, that included several years as a Member of the Legislative Council, George F. Huggins was knighted by his Sovereign, his name appearing in the Coronation Honours List and he was cited as being an outstanding citizen and one of the foremost businessmen of the era.

The outbreak of World War II was the prelude for George F. Huggins & Co. of six years of unparalleled activity. There was the war effort not only of the Commonwealth, but also of the Grand Alliance to be supported. Trinidad became a way-station of paramount importance to the navies and merchant shipping of the Allies. The firm was in a position to meet all the demands that were made of it, and played its full part in the eventual all-out effort that resulted in total victory. Sir George F. Huggins himself, having financed a four-engine bomber had it named after him. However, in 1941, he knew that a necessary trip to the United States for a major operation spelt his end. The fateful, and not unexpected, cable announcing his death arrived. Donald McBride, his close colleague, opened it and read it and after a long pause into which there must have flooded so many memories, he straightened himself up and said, simply, "We will continue."

With his death in 1941, Trinidad lost one of its illustrious adopted sons – a truly great entrepreneur of the Colonial era, whose business interests covered such a wide range of activities, many of which are now reflected in the vibrant Neal & Massy Group of companies that acquired the assets of George F. Huggins and Co. Ltd. in the decade of the seventies.

The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce is indeed honoured to induct Sir George F. Huggins (posthumously) to the Business Hall of Fame on this 23rd November, 2007.