

2009: WILLIAM H. SCOTT (1885-1972)

“Stay small. Work, treat your employees well,” were his watchwords in business. “Be compassionate, help those you can, and above all take care of your family,” were his maxims in life.

When he first set up business at the tender age of nineteen, William Henry Scott could not have imagined that 105 years later his grandsons and great grandsons would be presiding over an empire which included lumber and hardware, land and property development and substantial interests in the cinematic business. He was born on 22nd October, 1885 in Rich Plain, Diego Martin, and from his father, Shim Gott, a native of the province of Canton in China, he inherited a legacy of struggling in the face of difficult odds and he also learnt the meaning of ambition.

In 1898 at the age of thirteen, he left home and went in search of employment to help the family cope with their straitened circumstances and gained employment on a cocoa estate as a labourer. He worked next as a baker’s assistant – all the while slowly but conscientiously accumulating funds to give life to his bold assertion, “I intend to be my own boss.” At the age of twenty he had his \$100.00 “pot of gold” and his poor boy’s dream was becoming his wealthy man’s reality. He returned home to Diego Martin and opened his first business which was a general shop, thus fulfilling his adolescent promise to be his own boss in life. From this early beginning, businessmen and the general public began to appreciate the honesty with which all transactions were entered into by Mr. Scott, an unassuming and approachable gentleman, who as proof of his genuine desire to help the poor, always gave sympathetic consideration to all appeals of financial aid.

So successful was he with shop keeping that within two years he owned and operated five shops in the area as well as a factory producing non-alcoholic carbonated beverages. He then sold his Diego Martin businesses and headed for the city where there were other fields he wanted to conquer, not the least of which was marriage. In 1911 he sought and received the hand of Pauline Koo, a native of British Guiana, in holy matrimony which from the very inception gave him much pleasure as it was a distraction from the anxieties of the world of commerce.

He opened a business at the corner of George and Duke Streets in 1912, and later he moved to Prince Street where he purchased a grocery and bakery in adjoining

premises. Managing this combination was very exacting but he proved equal to the task. By 4.00 a.m. he would start work, busily preparing for the days distribution of bread between 6-6.30 a.m. and long after 1917, when he ceased operations at the bakery, there was a nostalgic yearning for “Scott’s penny loaf”.

In 1920, change and expansion were on his mind, and he established a provision store on Broadway which he then relocated to No. 51 Marine (now Independence) Square. As part of the expansion programme, he also started a lumber and hardware business at the location which grew so quickly, that by 1928 he moved the operation to new and more spacious premises at No. 30 South Quay, Port of Spain.

It was the ease with which his customers were able to obtain credit from Scott’s lumber and hardware store that encouraged them to give their patronage. This was probably the best known and best loved of all the Scott enterprises, as hundreds, indeed it would be no exaggeration to say thousands, of homes were built by poor people in Trinidad through easy payment terms so generously offered by the Company.

Mr. Scott, then motivated by a desire to go into the manufacturing business moved into the match making industry which unfortunately never got off the ground due to unfavorable weather conditions and extensive fire damage at the factory which caused him to sell out to his rival, Alston & Company. At this time, he was associated with the formation of Colonial Life Insurance Company of which he served as a director for a number of years.

In 1937, as a result of property acquisitions in Port of Spain and elsewhere, and also out of a desire to assist the less fortunate to build their homes, Williams H. Scott established Scott Land and Investment Company at Park Street. This decision to set up a real estate company came at a time when Trinidad was experiencing an acute housing shortage. Closely allied with that decision was his wish to establish a household furniture and furnishings factory at St. Joseph Road known as Scott Furnishing Company which helped relieve the shortage of furniture existing at the time. In addition to making his own furniture, he also purchased furniture from other local manufacturers. It was also in 1937 that Williams H. Scott in partnership with J.D. Beharry, a qualified pharmacist, established, at the corner of Frederick and Prince Streets, their drugstore - Beharry & Scott Limited - with William H. Scott as Chairman.

In 1944, William H. Scott purchased a substantial portion of the former Champs-Elysees estate in Maraval from the Boissiere family for housing development. This included Boissiere Nos. 1 and 2, Dibe, La Seiva and the Guava areas. These were earmarked for development as residential areas, most of which are now thriving communities.

Coming from a poor background himself, William H. Scott showed an acute sensitivity to the plight of the less fortunate, especially the Trinidad Chinese nationals. He did for many, what no one had done for him – extend a helping hand to get a start in life. It was on this basis of these altruistic activities that he was made a life member of the Chinese Association of Trinidad and Tobago. He sponsored the movement which brought the first Anglican minister to Trinidad and was a keen contributor to the establishment of the Chinese Alms House on Charlotte Street which accommodated aged indigents. He also assisted in the construction of a new wing at the Seventh day Adventist Community Hospital at Cocorite by donating \$70,000.00 to its expansion programme.

After almost fifty years of ceaseless activity in the commercial field, Mr. William Henry Scott at the zenith of his career, decided to retire from further active participation in the working of the “Scott” group, but continued to determine the economic and financial policy of the business. Control and management passed into the hand of his three sons. Winfield took charge of the Lumber and Hardware Department; William, the Provisions Department and Miller, Land and Property Development.

During the course of his long career, William H. Scott would stress the importance of diversification again and again. Guided by an enlightened intuition, he would step in and out of various ventures always, it would seem, at the right time. He never became so enamored of any one successful enterprise as to be tempted to commit himself irrevocably to it. There was a certain creative restlessness that buttressed his approach to business. He sought excellence and was not afraid of novelty. He was HONEST - he frequently declared “It is better to make an honest penny than a bad shilling!” – others noted that “his word was his bond”; METHODICAL – he followed a disciplined regimen for his entire life – one way in which this manifested itself was his abiding concern about punctuality; DILIGENT – his work was his life - he approached it with inexhaustible energy; and CARING – people were important to him as employees and as customers.

Until his death in November 1972 he experienced life in all its richness and variety. He traveled extensively, though he never visited China, but often visited countries where he could attend industrial exhibitions. Though he always put business before pleasure, he still found time to refresh and recreate himself at his holiday house at the islands. He loved fishing and swimming and owned a boat which had been built by Tugs and Lighters. But he was very much a family man. His brothers and sisters and their families gathered at his residence at #7 Queen's Park East on weekends which he reserved for his immediate family. To his children, he was a benevolent disciplinarian who encouraged them to think things through by themselves. He never provided ready-made answers or solutions to challenges and problems which arose in their lives from time to time and never ceased to emphasize the vital importance of a good education.

The Scott family tradition is indeed a beacon of hope for the future, an example of togetherness, of old fashioned values in a world that has almost forgotten the meaning of the words "family tradition, dedication to work and charity for others".

The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce is indeed honoured to induct Mr. William Henry Scott (posthumously) into the Business Hall of Fame on this 11th November, 2009.