

ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE

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Asa Gudmundsdottir was born in Iceland in April 1892. In June 1917 she married Dr. Henry Newcome Wright, an English solicitor, whom she had first met on a boat trip from England to Iceland some years earlier. There were no children by the marriage. In 1946, at the end of WW II, Newcome and Asa traveled to Trinidad where they purchased the Springhill Estate, a cocoa, coffee and citrus plantation, from Colonel Joseph Holmes an American Engineer who had owned the property since 1936. The 193-acre estate was situated at an elevation of 1200 feet in the Arima Valley, eight miles north of the town of Arima. In November 1955, Newcome died and Asa was left to single-handedly manage the estate.

In 1950, Dr. William Beebe, an American scientist, adventurer, author and the first curator of birds at the Bronx Zoo in New York, in the twilight of his years, established the Tropical Research Station of the New York Zoological Society at Simla, only four miles lower down the Arima valley from Springhill. Before the purchase of Simla was completed, Dr. Beebe was a guest of Newcome and Asa at Springhill. Dr. Beebe and his fellow scientists did research and produced papers on several aspects of Natural History, including birds, butterflies and other insects, crabs and bats and Dr. Beebe produced a paper on the Ecology of the Arima Valley. These papers were published in "*Zoologica*" the scientific magazine of the N.Y. Zoological Society. Dr. Beebe died from pneumonia at Simla in June 1962, at the age of 82 years.

At that time there was no nearby accommodation for visitors to Trinidad wishing to visit the Arima Valley and Mrs Wright soon offered one and then two of her bedrooms for rent to guests. Two other early guests were Don Eckelberry, an internationally famous American bird artist and illustrator, accompanied by his wife Virginia, herself a foremost artist and fabric designer, who first visited Trinidad in July 1959 where they were the guests of Asa Wright. They became very friendly with Asa and again visited in 1961 and in 1963. On the latter occasion, Don spent three months at Springhill painting some of the birds of the Arima Valley. This work entitled "*A Trinidad Galaxy*" was published in the March/ April 1967 issue of "*Audubon Magazine*" together with an accompanying article by Don entitled "*My Eden*", his impressions of Springhill.

Asa suffered from angina pectoris and in early 1967 was hospitalised after she had suffered an attack. Concerned persons immediately contacted Don Eckelberry and requested that he travel to Trinidad to discuss the future of Springhill Estate with Asa. She agreed to sell Springhill to a group of interested persons headed by Don Eckelberry in order to establish a Nature Centre so that Springhill and the wildlife thereon be conserved in perpetuity. The selling price was US \$75,000. The amount was raised through donations made by several International Conservation Organisations, by

corporate citizens and by several persons, many of whom had been the guests of Asa at Springhill over the years.

On 27th October 1967 the deed transferring the Springhill Estate from Mrs. Asa Wright to the Royal Bank Trust Co., the trustees of the Asa Wright Nature Centre, was signed and on 5th November, 1967 the Asa Wright Nature Centre was officially opened by Sir Hugh Wooding, the Chief Justice of Trinidad and Tobago. The Asa Wright Nature Centre is a not-for-profit Trust established to preserve part of the Arima Valley in its natural state and to create a Conservation and Study area for the enjoyment of all persons.

The early years were some very difficult times for the fledgling Nature Centre. With poor communication, few guests, and little income, coupled with civil unrest in Trinidad and Tobago, the Nature Centre was forced to close its doors from 15th May 1970 until 5th February, 1971.

Asa Wright died on 6th February, 1971. Interest-free loans from some of the Board Members assisted the Nature Centre in meeting its financial commitments but it was not until 1974 after the Asa Wright Nature Centre had appointed Wonder Bird Tours of New York as its Booking Agent that the Nature Centre balanced its budget for the first time. With an increasing number of North Americans traveling "south" and many of this number being interested in nature and in birdwatching it was very convenient to have the Nature Centre's "Front Desk" in New York in order to service and to give information to these prospective guests.

Meanwhile in 1970 the Tropical Research Station at Simla was closed, and in January 1975 the 240-acre Simla property, a gift from the N.Y. Zoological Society was transferred to the Bank of Nova Scotia Trust Co. which had replaced the Royal Bank Trust Co. as the trustees of the Asa Wright Nature Centre.

Nature Centres in the United States and Nature Reserves in the U.K. obtain most of their funding from donations made by Corporate citizens, from gifts, from bequeaths and through annual Government, State or local City grants. In Trinidad and Tobago non-Government Environmental organisations have to work very hard at fund-raising if they are to achieve their objectives.

The Asa Wright Nature Centre was fortunate to own a building which could be used as a naturalists' lodge and was thus able to generate revenue to meet its goals. However the Board of Management of the Asa Wright Nature Centre has never lost sight of its main objectives of Environmental Conservation and Environmental Education and over the years any surplus funds have been used to purchase additional forested lands in the Arima Valley, at Lalaja Road and more recently in the Aripo Valley, to preserve as Conservation areas and Wildlife Sanctuaries.

Beginning in 1972 and until 1988, the Asa Wright Nature Centre organised Natural History Seminar/Workshops in several disciplines to which suitably qualified Trinidad and Tobago students were awarded scholarships. In 1998 an Education Officer was appointed to develop and to implement an Environmental Education Programme for students attending Primary Schools in Arima, Blanchisseuse and Brasso Seco. Initially this was a pilot project but in 2001 the programme has been expanded to embrace other age groups in these communities. An adequate budget has been provided for the development of this Environmental Education Programme.

In 1984, Caligo Ventures Inc. of Armonk, New York replaced Wonder Bird Tours as the Booking Agent for the Asa Wright Nature Centre, and immediately the service to our prospective guests and our advertising and promotion programme was noticeably enhanced.

Seventeen years later, a mutually rewarding relationship between the Asa Wright Nature Centre and Caligo Ventures Inc. continues to flourish.

Today, the Asa Wright Nature Centre has grown from its original 193-acre Springhill Estate and now owns just under 900 acres of land and has leased an additional 250-acre parcel from the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in the forested Northern Range.

It has sixty eight (68) persons on its payroll and employs another eight driver/guides who provide services to the Nature Centre and to its guests.

Over the years the Asa Wright Nature Centre has received many awards including a National Award : *The Hummingbird Medal - Gold* in 1993; The Caribbean Conservation Association's Conservation Award in 1992 ; also selected as a finalist in the " *Tourism for Tomorrow*" Competition organised by British Airways; selected as a finalist in the *Islands Magazine* Award for Eco-tourism; in 1998 was the winner of the *Islands Magazine* Award for Eco-tourism.

In 1999 the AWNC was selected as the model for a case study on "*Ecotourism as a strategy for sustainable development*", a study funded by the UNDP.

Don Eckelberry the "*Founding Father*" of the Asa Wright Nature Centre passed away in January 2001 but he was here to share the pleasure with all of us when in the October 1999 issue of the prestigious "*Audubon Magazine*" the Asa Wright Nature Centre was identified as one of the best Eco-lodges in the World.