

In Memoriam

Theodore Francis “Frankie” Farrell

29 December, 1907 – 19 December, 2003

Frankie Farrell was born to Charles Farrell and his wife Mary (Brunton) Farrell on 29 December, 1907. He was the last of a family of seven boys, and apparently the smallest. He attributed his small size to the following circumstances. At age two he developed jaundice and was ill for a long time, badly enough to be thought in danger of death. After he recovered, he disliked food and would not eat reasonable amounts until late in his teenage years. The family lived in Picton Street for some time during his boyhood, but I do not know if they lived there when he went to school at Tranquility Boys Intermediate School. I suspect they did, for it would have been easily possible for him to walk to school from there.

In one of his later years at Tranquility a new boy came to the school, entering as was customary, in the lowest class. After two weeks he was promoted to the class above, and after another two weeks he was again promoted, going on from there to complete his studies with distinction. That schoolboy was Eric Eustace Williams, who graduated from Tranquility to Queen’s Royal College (QRC) following in the footsteps of Frankie who had won an exhibition (scholarship) to QRC in 1922. Eric E. Williams later became Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago.

At QRC Frankie came under the influence of Dr. B.J. Bedell, the botany teacher. From then to his death he retained his interest in plants, sometimes a little wistfully regretting his almost complete neglect of animals, but most of the time thoroughly enjoying his studies of plants.

He had two chances for winning a scholarship to study at a university abroad, in 1926 and 1927, but failed by just a few marks both times. He was ever to regret this since the family could not afford to pay for studies abroad. After leaving school he worked as a laboratory assistant to Prof. Fred Hardy of the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture (ICTA) for two years, and enjoyed this tremendously. Hardy complimented him on his work and encouraged him to study science, (which he could have done as an external student of the University of London) but Frankie was very doubtful that as a local person he would be able to find employment as a botanist or soil scientist in the colonial system of the time. He decided to join the Civil Service, and worked his way up the ladder in various departments.

Beginning as a clerk to the judges he was transferred after a few years to the health department as a principal officer, and later to the Colonial Secretariat. He became Supervisor of Elections in 1946, and remained there for the rest of his career in the Civil Service. During this time he made visits to Guyana and the UK on business related to elections, and often recalled those visits in conversations he had with me in later years. In 1951, he was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) by King George VI.

All of Frankie’s brothers were avid sportsmen, as was he, and played football at various levels. Frankie did not persist with football because of his small size, but he played tennis into his seventies, well enough in the earlier years to win the Queen’s Park tennis tournament on one occasion. To my knowledge, he did not play

cricket, but he enjoyed watching it at the Oval, having joined the Queen’s Park Cricket Club in 1930.

When The Trinidad Field Naturalists’ Club was revived in 1954 I met Frankie for the first time, and for the next six years when I was the Hon. Secretary, I met him no more often than any other member. In the 1960s he would visit the Herbarium passing close to my



Theodore Francis “Frankie” Farrell

laboratory at UWI in the same building. He seemed to me then a lonely person without close friends. It was only when the Botany Group of the Club was organised in 1977 that I got to know him well. In the beginning the group comprised seven people in addition to Frankie: Anne and John Hilton, Vilma and Judith Lastique, Denise Lee, Luisa Zuniaga and myself. Many people came for one or a few visits, but those eight people formed the core of the group. The Lastiques left after two years and Denise’s outings became less regular as the cancer from which she eventually died made its presence felt. A close camaraderie developed between the six (and later five) of us as we studied the orchid *Cyrtopodium broadwayi*, and afterwards when we studied other aspects of the Aripo Savannahs.

Frankie and I were drawn closer together by our shared interest in trees, which eventually resulted in the joint authorship of the book “Native Trees of Trinidad and Tobago”. We began to organise our own trips, apart from the others. I particularly remember one such trip when we went with a visiting amateur botanist to the Longdenville Forest Reserve. His car gave a lot of trouble, and we had to push it “at least 15 times” as I wrote in my notes later. There were many other trips, including a hike from Brasso Seco to Maracas Bay, one up the Rio Seco, and a fishing trip on the Ortoire River.

As a member of the Club, Frankie was loyal and active. He attended all meetings and field trips. He was Honorary Treasurer for several years in the 1930s. He was Vice-President from 1972 to 1974, was Honorary Auditor from 1975 to 1978, a Committee Member in 1979 and again in 1987-1988. He was Vice-President again in 1980 - 1982 and 1986, and President in 1983 and 1984. When in 1991 we had difficulty in finding a president for our 100th Anniversary Year, Frankie at age 83 loyally undertook the task despite the demands made on him by his wife’s declining health. In 1993 at the request of his Excellency President Noor Hassanali he carried a Trinidad and Tobago flag to the top of El Tucuche on Republic Day. He was then 85 years old, and his achievement is a record unlikely to be broken easily. He gave lectures to the Club, wrote articles for its two publications and for other publications such as the Trinidad Naturalist, and occasionally represented the Club at meetings abroad.

He belonged to other societies as well, being a member of the Horticultural Society and Friends of the Botanic Gardens. He was a founding member of the Rhand Credit Union and its President for eight years.

As advancing age began to take its toll on the Botany Group, field trips were fewer, and the botanical work ceased altogether in 2000. After that, the four remaining members would meet at my house in Talparo on the Sunday after the Club’s meeting and talk of

“old times” and new concerns. As Frankie’s hearing deteriorated and he became less able to follow the conversations, he took to visiting me alone on the following Sunday. He would go by bus to Arima and I would meet him there and drive him to my home. We would talk mainly about current events. Since he read the Express and I the Trinidad Guardian he would bring with him articles cut out from the Express that he wanted to discuss with me.

Frankie had married Elsa Lumsden in 1936, and with her had three children, Maureen, Patricia and Richard. As far as I know, their union of 56 years was one without even a ripple of discontent. Elsa was an Anglican, who practised her religion, but Frankie though baptised an Anglican never practised any religion so far as I know. In all those years of association, and at all those meetings at my home, the topic of religion came up for discussion only three or four times. It was on one of these occasions that Frankie mentioned

his belief in reincarnation. I was shocked, to say the least. The idea seemed to be so foreign to the Western World, I wondered if he was serious. My few questions brought answers that indicated he was. He also said he was not afraid of death. Perhaps, these deep-seated convictions were at the root of what I mistook at first to be loneliness, but was really a kind of self-sufficiency that is rare indeed. More than any other man I have known, Frankie has gone placidly amid the noise and the haste of the modern world – and enjoyed his going.

Victor C. Quesnel.

Editor’s Note: The 1987-88 issue of Living World was dedicated to Theodore Francis Farrell.

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