

## Thomas Irwin Potter

By KARIN DE LA BASTIDE

Caroni (1975) Ltd., Brechin Castle, Couva.

Thomas Irwin Potter was one of the founder members and a former president of The Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club. He was born in Port of Spain on 14th September 1864, the elder son of Augustus St. Clair and Margaret Hutchison Potter of St. Vincent and Trinidad respectively.

He received his early education at a private school in Port of Spain before proceeding to Queen's Royal College where he completed his education in 1881. From an early age it was evident that he had a great love for nature for he spent many happy hours studying plants and animals in the vast garden of his mother's home in Cascade, his father having died when he was a very young boy.

He joined the Civil Service in 1883 and served in subordinate positions in the Crown Lands and Education departments until the end of 1898 when he was promoted to the post of Warden of La Brea and Oropouche.

In 1891 his love for nature prompted him and his colleagues to get together and form The Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club whose main function was the study of plant and animal life in the island.

In 1894 he married the former Alice Mary Meecham of London, England whom he met in Trinidad during her visit to her mother's sister, Eliza, wife of Charles Stollmeyer. The union produced nine children, one daughter and eight sons – Sophie (1895-1977), Arthur (1896-1962), Leonard (1897-1956), Walter (1899-1970), Conrad (1901-1956), Frank (1903-1928), John (1906-1966), Lionel (1908-1961) and Keith (1913-1976), all of whom made very worthwhile contributions to Trinidad and Tobago in their many and varied fields which included agriculture, teaching and scouting.

As a result of his promotion, Thomas moved his family to La Brea where he not only served as warden but also as Harbour Master of Brighton Harbour, Supervisor of Customs, Magistrate of the La Brea–Oropouche district and Justice of the Peace for the County of St. Patrick. The Ward Union of La Brea and Oropouche never prospered more than it did during the years of Mr. Potter's tenure of office. He won the love and respect of all the residents making no class distinctions yet retaining his own self respect.

He secured for Government a new site for the village of La Brea and had it properly laid out. He also encouraged the development of oil-bearing land in La Brea and Guapo and succeeded in having the Southern

Main Road extended as a carriage road through La Brea–Guapo to Cedros. He improved Siparia Village and in 1902 secured the Irwin Recreation Ground for the residents.

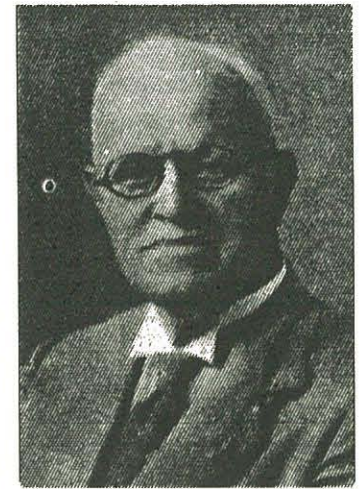
Mr. Potter was greatly missed by the residents of the area when he was transferred back to Port of Spain in 1911 as Registrar-General of the then Colony of Trinidad and Tobago. Now he was able to pursue his hobbies in earnest, for of these there were many. As well as being a keen and versatile naturalist, he was also an ardent horticulturist and planted many flowers and shrubs in the garden of his new home in Alexandra Street, specialising in orchids of which he grew numerous varieties. His energy seemed limitless, for he was also a keen photographer, developing and printing all his own pictures, a stamp collector and a collector of tropical butterflies.

The Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club organised many outings to various areas of the Island and Thomas hardly ever missed one of them always taking along his camera to be able to capture on film interesting plants and creatures encountered on these expeditions.

He was Registrar General until 1918 when he was appointed Inspector of Wardens. During this period he compiled a census of the colony and in 1924 superintended the first election of members of the Legislative Council. He served on the Port of Spain town board, the City Council, Central Board of Health and the committee to rearrange records in the secretariat. He subsequently supervised the second election of members of the Legislative Council in 1927.

On 1st October 1926, Thomas Potter retired from the Civil Service after a long and very distinguished career as is evidenced from the above. However, he continued to serve Trinidad and Tobago in an unofficial capacity as an agriculturist, horticulturist, historian and naturalist. After his retirement from Government service, he accepted the post of secretary of the Agricultural Society of Trinidad & Tobago which gave him an outlet for his abundant energy on matters of agriculture.

During all this time, he continued to be an active member of The Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club and a more knowledgeable naturalist was hard to find. He





served as president of the club and it may be said that under his presidency, the club enjoyed one of its greatest periods of popularity. He was also a founder member and past president of the Horticultural Society and the services rendered by him to horticulturists in the country were invaluable.

He shared his vast knowledge with others by writing and publishing many papers. For example, in 1942 he published a work entitled "Fruit – native and introduced – in the Island of Trinidad, B.W.I." He was also a fellow of the Zoological Society of London.

A simple man, devoted to his wife and family, as well as to his work and country, he was awarded the M.B.E. in recognition of the tremendous contribution he made to the progress and advancement of Trinidad and Tobago.

Thomas Irwin Potter died on 18th November 1943 after a long and very fulfilling life. A man of honesty and integrity, his contribution to The Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club will never be forgotten.