

## CONTENTS

February 7, 1922 / 1

### CHAPTER 1

Trinidadian Heritage / 3

### CHAPTER 2

Liverpool Years / 9

### CHAPTER 3

Aboard the *Robert Kerr* / 17

### CHAPTER 4

Odd Job Man / 27

### CHAPTER 5

Inferno and Renewal / 33

### CHAPTER 6

The Perfect Place / 39

### CHAPTER 7

Bartender Standards / 45

### CHAPTER 8

Guardian, Teacher and Friend / 51

### CHAPTER 9

The Angel and the Pirates / 59

### CHAPTER 10

Triumphs and Tribulations / 65

CHAPTER 11  
A New Home / 75

CHAPTER 12  
Rights and Racism / 83

CHAPTER 13  
Triumph and Tragedy / 89

CHAPTER 14  
“Merry Christmas, Joe!” / 97

CHAPTER 15  
Life Goes On / 105

CHAPTER 16  
Home Fires / 115

CHAPTER 17  
The Bracelet / 123

CHAPTER 18  
Decline / 127

CHAPTER 19  
“The Passing of a Great Soul” / 133

CHAPTER 20  
Joe’s Legacy / 139

*Author’s Note* / 149

*Notes* / 151

*Bibliography* / 165

*About the Authors* / 173

*Index* / 175

## February 7, 1922



The rowboat edged its way up rain-soaked Dunsmuir Street. Securely tied upon the bed of a Ford Model T pickup, the boat was heaped with brilliant arrangements of flowers and evergreen boughs freshly cut from Stanley Park. Ahead of the truck, a hearse was conveying the body of Seraphim Joseph Fortes to the stone steps of Holy Rosary Cathedral. The coffin could barely be glimpsed between the rows of uniformed police guardsmen who strode alongside the vehicle. It was the rowboat that brought tears to the eyes of many in the crowd of thousands who had converged upon downtown Vancouver. Only months earlier, that very same boat had plied the waters off English Bay beach, Joe Fortes pulling hard at the oars, his muscular arms

## OUR FRIEND JOE

gleaming in the summer sun, his rich Trinidadian voice bellowing out orders: “Kick yo’ feet chile! Don’ you stop kickin’ or you’ll get nowhere fast!”

Joe Fortes was a Vancouver legend. Everyone, from the wealthiest businessman on Shaughnessy Heights to the back-alley hobo of the city’s grittiest neighbourhoods, knew of Joe. There was always a story in the paper of another of Joe’s rescues at English Bay. Officially, he was credited with saving twenty-six people from drowning—unofficially, many more.<sup>1</sup> Joe Fortes. Shipwrecked sailor. Little education. No formal training in lifesaving, child psychology or criminology. Yet Joe became Vancouver’s first official swimming instructor, lifeguard and a special constable, hired by the City of Vancouver to maintain law and order at English Bay. He was a father figure to generations of Vancouver children, and a friend to many more. And now, on this cold, late-winter morning, people gathered along the funeral procession route to Holy Rosary Cathedral to say goodbye to Joe.

## CHAPTER 1

# Trinidadian Roots



For a man who was to have such a profound impact on the youth of Vancouver, Joe's own childhood is shrouded in mystery. Despite much research, no birth certificate or record has ever been found. In an 1891 Canada census, Joe gave his birthplace as Barbados.<sup>1</sup> A 1901 census listed Trinidad as his birthplace.<sup>2</sup> A 1911 census offered nothing more definitive than "West Indies."<sup>3</sup> There continues to be some debate over Joe's origin, but in all early interviews, he confirmed his birthplace and childhood home as Trinidad. An exact birthdate is also hard to establish—was it February 9, 1863? Or was it 1865? Again the dates in the censuses conflict. What we do know is that Joe's West Indian father was a sugar plantation worker, his mother a

## OUR FRIEND JOE

woman of Spanish ancestry. This mixed race parentage resulted in Joe's skin being a tone of chestnut brown, rather than the typically darker colouration of West Indians.

Further information about Joe's background may be gained through a short study of Trinidad's history. Discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1498, Trinidad lies thirteen miles north of the Venezuelan coast. For many years the island languished under Spanish governance. The land was covered with a nearly impenetrable forest of tropical vegetation. Trinidad's wet season extends from June through December, pummelling the island with heavy rains—Joe was obviously well-prepared for Vancouver's overcast skies. Any semblance of industry amounted to little more than a scattering of small farms. In 1783, observing a largely Amerindian population of less than three thousand, the Spanish crown offered thirty-two acres of free land to white colonists and half that amount to “free Negroes” and persons of colour. Conditionally, each new arrival had to be Roman Catholic and from a country friendly to Spain.<sup>4</sup> So began a slow but steady colonization of Trinidad. It is quite possible that some of Joe's maternal ancestors were among those who accepted the generous Spanish offer.

On February 18, 1797, Spanish rule abruptly ended when Governor José María Chacón surrendered to a British fleet of eighteen warships under the command of Sir Ralph Abercromby. By 1802, a widely diverse Trinidad populace was formally ceded to the United Kingdom. Like most Trinidadians in the nineteenth century, Joe proudly considered himself British to the core.

Trade vessels from Liverpool and Southampton, similar to the ones Joe would sail on in his teenage years, nosed up to the Port of Spain dockyards in ever-increasing numbers as demand for

Caribbean products grew. Sugar, the white gold that had fast become a staple on European dining tables, was particularly sought after. At the time of succession, about 150 sugar estates were established along the drier west coast of Trinidad. By mid-century, with generous British financing, sugar was at peak production, never falling below twenty thousand tons per year. In 1866, a record forty thousand tons of sugar was harvested, and plantation owners basked in the wealth.<sup>5</sup> Joe grew up in a world that revolved around the sugar industry.

Under the leadership of Lord Harris, governor of Trinidad from 1846 to 1854, the island had been divided into eight counties, each of which was subdivided into wards. Although little is known of Joe's educational background, he probably attended one of the "ward schools" that had been established for primary age students. Education in nineteenth-century Trinidad was a haphazard process, often dictated by work obligations in the cane fields or the ability to navigate mud-laden roads to the schoolhouse during the wet season. It is said that a Trinidadian teacher spent more time luxuriating in a hammock than in front of a classroom while absent pupils helped with the harvest.<sup>6</sup> As a subject of the British crown, Joe would have been taught in English, recognized as the official language of Trinidad since the 1802 succession. Upon completion of his primary studies, Joe would have been faced with a simple decision—attend one of the two island colleges, or continue his secondary education abroad.

During his teenage years, Joe may have attended St Mary's College, the sole institution for young Catholics in 1870s Trinidad. The alternative, Protestant faith-based Queen's Collegiate School, had been angrily condemned by the Roman Catholic Archbishop Ferdinand English some years earlier. St. Mary's College, opened in 1863, offered boarders and day students courses