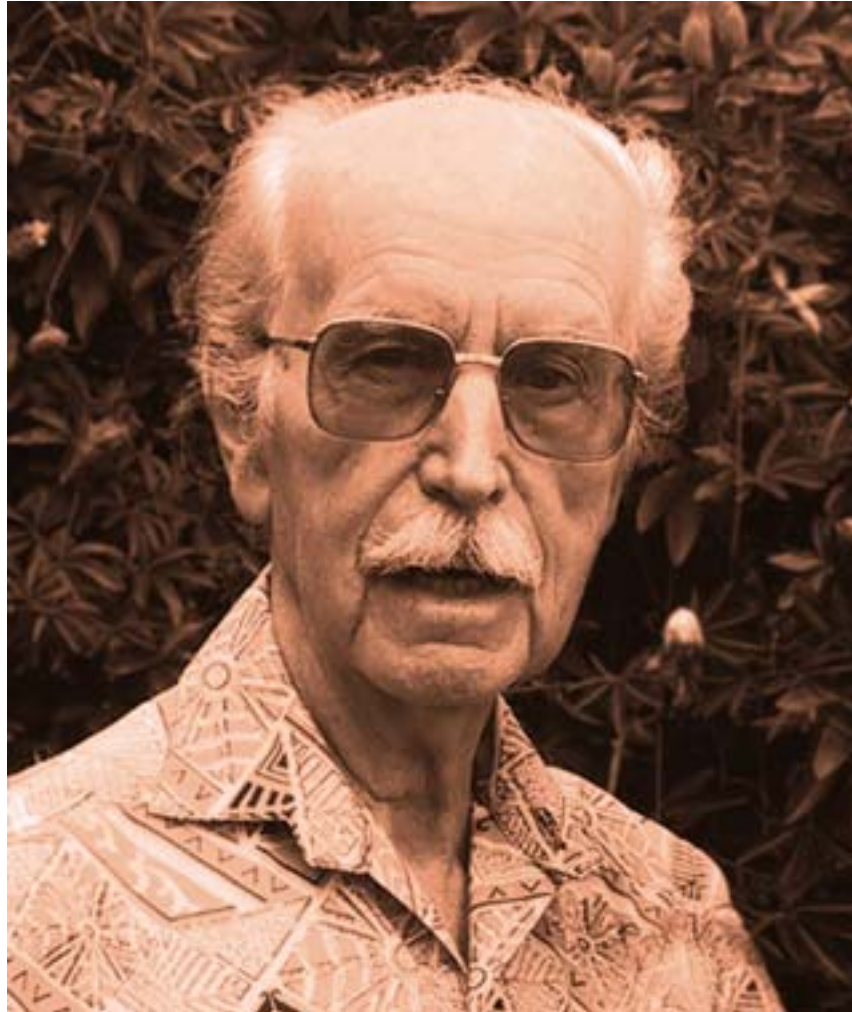


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## Pierre Bourgeois - A Man with a Vision

By Vincent Boulekone

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This week Vanuatu has lost the man most instrumental in its economic growth over the past half century.

Pierre was born in France in 1925 where he studied philosophy. One of his first jobs was as a journalist. During World War II, he was sent on a troop ship to French Indochina (now Vietnam). On his return to France, the East beckoned still, so he boarded a ship in 1945 to return to Indochina. On route, the ship called at Noumea and at Santo, which had been a major military base during the War. Pierre decided he liked the look of the New Hebrides, so he disembarked in Santo and found work with Burns Philp.

It was not long before Pierre started his own trade stores; a series of them on the small islands off Malekula. They prospered and Pierre eventually expanded into Port Vila with Oceana store, located where the Banque Indochine (later Bank of Hawaii and now ANZ) was sited. He competed with CFNH, with support from the Prisunic department store chain in France. He introduced Bata shoes to the New Hebrides and was the first store to bring in goods for the Melanesians as well as for the expatriate community. His store displayed its goods on tables where the clients could touch and feel them, instead of keeping them behind glass counters

as the other Vila shops did.

In time, he moved across the street and opened Hebrida store (now Hebrida Market Place). Eventually, he merged his Hebrida store with Ballande (formerly CFNH and now Centre Point).

Pierre continued to expand with Hebrigas ( which became Boral and now Origin), and he opened the Fiat dealership and Hertz Car Rental. He built the Vaté Hotel (now the Olympic Hotel) and then entered into three joint ventures with Trammell Crow of Texas: Tukituki Rranch at Devil's Point, Tassiriki Subdivision, and the Intercontinental Hotel (now Le Meridien).

It was Pierre who got tourism off the ground in the New Hebrides in the late sixties when he built Le Lagon Hotel and negotiated for the first tourist ship to come to the archipelago, "The Lindblad Explorer" (today called simply, "The Explorer" or "The Little Red Ship", which still brings tourists to visit Tanna, Pentecost and other outer islands).

He was instrumental in the first radio station in the New Hebrides (now VBTC), and opened tourist bungalows on Tanna with Bob Paul. He then built the original airstrips on several outer islands. He was also instrumental in the creation of the first Chamber of Commerce.

Foreseeing the arrival of ever larger cruise ships, Pierre built the road to what is now the main wharf and was a joint partner in the creation of Star Wharf.

More recent constructions for which he was responsible include the Laguna Building on the corner opposite the Port Vila Post Office (which houses Prouds Duty Free), and the Hebrida Market House across the parking lot from Centre Point, as well as Erakor House at the Korman Stadium roundabout which he gifted to the Erakor community with whom he maintained a special relationship as a result of its role as custom owner of the two small islands he created at the bottom of the first lagoon when he developed Tassiriki Estate and the Intercontinental Hotel.

Pierre was knowledgeable about the customs of Vanuatu and had been made an member of several villages. In his later years he championed the role of the custom system and urged its strengthening, especially in regard to the land system.

He had a deep knowledge of the NiVanuatu and their ways, especially the village of Erakor and its leaders. He helped the NiVanuatu to launch themselves in business and knew well the chiefs of all the villages of Efate. He was the "bridge" between the European and native community, commencing in the days of the Condominium, being on good terms with both groups.

Also in recent years he had been asked by the government to be the Chairman of Air Vanuatu, when it was having financial problems His small board of directors (5) saw the turnaround of the airline.

His original profession as a journalist brought him full circle to his most recent interest: -- the launching of The Independent newspaper, with the vision that a Multilanguage newspaper carry the wisdom of elder NiVanuatu leaders and be distributed to outer island schools to educate our leaders of tomorrow as to the current affairs and history of our country. I and others will try to see that that vision comes to pass

Pierre died in Sydney on Saturday, 3 January, 2004, as a result of a series of irreversible strokes. He had continued to work a full day until 24 December, when he was evacuated from Port Vila.

Through his efforts, much of Pierre's vision for Vanuatu has become a reality. While his legacy may not be well known to new comers, he has a special place in the history of our country.