

Interview with Don Manning
3/17/03

The project called the Reef was done by the Robbins brothers, Grover and Harry, of Blowing Rock, NC, in the late 1960's. Their corporation, Carolina Caribbean Corp., had done Hound Ears, an upscale development in NC, in the 1960's. The architect was named McCathy, from Kingsport, TN, who won awards for the design throughout the South.

I, lived in Atlanta and worked for Kaiser Aluminum and Chemical Sales Corp. I frequently used Hound Ears' golf course, in Blowing Rock N.C. to entertain my clients. One day in 1965, I was on the golf course when a small, single engine plane landed on the fairway right where we were playing. Out comes Grover Robbins. That's when I first met him. He was a great land developer and had visions for many large resort projects.

After 1967/8, Kaiser sent me to Antigua and Jamaica where there were bauxite mines. I also worked in Puerto Rico and at that time Polly and I bought a house in St. Croix on Little Princess Hill.

About that time I started going into companies with problems and straightening things out. In 1968, I knew the general contractor and builder here. I was asked to come to St. Croix as Executive Vice-President of CCC . Around 1969 Grover died. He was still a young man in his 40's. I took charge after Grover's death.

When I came to the Reef, the two bedroom units were mostly finished and the one bedroom units were about half finished. They were still putting top soil on the golf course. CCC had 6 major projects going then, in FL, NC & SC. All had golf courses. CCC had an in house golf course architect, Dennis Lehman, who designed all CCC golf courses.

With Grover's death, and with CCC being a stock corporation, the development had to be concluded. The two bedroom units at the upper level had the best view and went for the highest price, about \$94-98,000. The one bedroom units were about \$38 to \$60,000.

The tennis courts were not built yet but the pool was done. The office building was there and in it was my office, Joe Cuff, the Hotel Manager's office, and Tony Shimatero, the manager of the condos and grounds, and the Chief accountant, Bill Hartnet. There were also about 4-5 women in the office, secretaries and accounting clerks.

There was no gate house then. What is now the main road was roughed out and blacktopped. An additional entrance was by the "pantry" store, a convenience store and served both section I and section IV. One entrance was by 128, Walley's and came off Meggie Hill Road. That road did go on to section IV and the main entrance the same as today.

Section III was laid out on the slope above the 5th hole. Section II above the 6th hole. With circumstances as they were, they were never completed.

CCC also owned Romney Point as well as 13 acres above Roebucks with a Sugar Mill on it. Roebucks were well schooled and mostly sold lots from their land. I sold the land of Romney Point to George Cassis a St. Louis Missouri Architect. This was after Fountain Valley. Before that sale was completed, the price was further reduced from \$250,000 to 175,000

The top soil for the golf course came from Fredericksted. Rocky Sarascini, a pro with CCC from NC hired Alain Fevrier from Carlton golf course, where he worked.

About 50% of the units were under contract for people from the US who were planning to use them for about 2-4 weeks each year. Thirty units were in the Hotel pool. There was lots of promotion and advertising done in the states. It was like the development at Queen's Quarter. At that time, Little Princess and Hermon Hill were the premiere places to live being close to Christiansted.

At the East end, things were very difficult. There just was not anything there. The land was bought from Peter Skov in the 1950's for about \$147,000. That was about \$3,000 to \$5,000 an acre. It was a rising real estate market .

We now live in Vero Beach, FL, which is a very orderly and well maintained area. We also live in the NC mountains. I went there when I did projects for Chubb insurance who owned \$200,000,000 of properties. St. Croix cannot ever be like that because of the lack of good tourism here. Melvin Evans was the first appointed Governor and then the first elected governor. Bob Merwin was an earlier appointed governor, prior to Evans. They were good but Until a total acceptance of tourism, St. Croix will flounder.

In the early days, with the hotel going, maid and a laundry service was daily. There was a General Contractor, Edward Gerritts but we, St. Croix Ltd, hired and paid the construction employees and gardeners. There may well have been 500 employees at one time during construction.

Part of the reason that the golf course was so good then was that each night a total of 10,000 gallons of water was put on the greens when CCC was here. The villas were never planned to have cisterns. Water was to come from wells and an RO plant.

Many local people were mostly very critical of the looks of the development: however, the project, won awards for the design. From the first, there were a number of architects who owned units at the Reef. Charlie Currier, for one, and Murry Gibson who owned large architectural firms in Hartford. They owned two units just a few units down from the restaurant. Charlie's wife, Dorrie, was an artist who was well known for painting water color scenes of St. Croix.

In 1972, the "massacre" at Fountain Valley occurred. Some Viet Nam veterans came out of the bush on the golf course near the club house and shot some golfers. Then they went on to the club house and shot and killed the person substituting just that day for the owner of the dress shop. Six people were killed. Some of the killers were sent to jail, but the leader escaped Hijacking a plane and going to Cuba.

Around 1968, I remember a party at the Merwins in Fredericksted. All the men were in a coat and tie, and the women were elegant, as people dressed then, when in came someone in overalls. All the guests greeted him warmly and I was told that he was Fletcher Pence, who did the wonderful mahogany wood work. When I expressed my dismay I was told we were lucky he had decided to deign to even have clothes on – he was very rough and often did his woodworking in the nude at his shop on Mahogany Road.

That reminds me that at one point when Grover's daughter, who lived a very jet set life, was here, Joe Cuff the manager came to me and said that the Cruzans would not work around the pool because she was walking around the pool and swimming in the nude. I told Joe her to get her dressed or to get her out of here.

After Fountain Valley, the real estate market disintegrated. Of the contracts with money down, some said just to keep the money but they would not complete the purchase. Things were bad on the island. Someone, John Cavanaugh, of First City National Bank was robbed in daylight. Eastern Airlines cancelled flights to St. Croix.

We were still spending a lot of money to maintain the golf course and hotel rooms.. The hotel was operating. With Eastern stopping its flights and advising people not to come here at all the resort business went to a low dollar volume.

There was an RO plant from the first operating on oil power. It brought its problems. It was "down" about 50% of the time mostly due to lack of expertise. Meanwhile, we were getting water bills from Schuster (who refilled the water tank) averaging \$10,000 to \$50,000. Meanwhile, Schuster was refilling the water tank from tanker trucks and I was getting water bills that totaled \$70,000 each 90 days.

The landscaping was supervised by the golf course supervisor. He had worked with Carolina Caribbean Corp. in NC for example at Beech Mountain development. Plants came from a landscape contractor in Ft. Lauderdale. Everything was first class, best varieties and quality. We brought the plants in by the container load.

From 1968 to 1972, CCC stock which had started at \$2 a share had soared to \$70 a share, OTC. We were still doing a lot of promotion. We had a charter airline bring in 200 people at a time to stay at the Reef. They were welcomed by a steel band and drinks at the airport. There were lots of promotions with travel agents, all promoted by CCC. The Reef showed results from that but it is a very slow process. CCC had eight planes, one a Lear Jet, that they used to bring people here.

At that time, Charlie Blair, Maureen O'Hara's husband owned Antilles Air. She was unbelievably beautiful in person with a wonderful personality. She was also an unpretentious person. If the guy who was supposed to gas up the planes was not there, she would just pump gas if necessary. Mary Simpson and Fran Smith, who are owners of Sutherland Tours, also worked for Charlie Blair.

I remember once being in Jacques, a true French man was he, to get a haircut. The place across the street that later became Nolans was a bar then, run by Mary Simpson and her friend Fran. Victor Borge came in to Jacques with a bloody mary and then went back and brought them for all in the shop and proceeded to put on a ½ hour impromptu show for us. Victor made a lot of money on the island. He hired a broker from CT, Frank Wiesner, who found a local who spoke Spanish who was able to deal with the Cruzans. According to Frank, Victor made \$20,000,000 dealing in land at the East End.

Grapetree Bay Hotel was developed by Fairleigh Dickinson and Bob Lodge. It was designed by an Chinese architect named Chang. The guests departed with wonderful memories and the Danish wooden doorknobs and the pictures from the wall. The modern Danish furniture was apparently too large to take. When Bob Lodge had financial troubles he paid FD back with pieces of land that he owned all over the island. Farleigh thought of buying the land which is now Villa Madeleine to build 9 more holes of golf that would adjoin the Reef's course.

Don Cady and Lon Sutherland, whose father then owned Sutherland Tours built the Grapetree Beach Hotel, now Divi Divi.

Joe Cuff, our manager, who had worked for Eric Lawaetz, who did the then hotel, St. Croix by the Sea, was in poor health, and had a heart attack and died. He had been very hard working and had done a good job.

I was the first person to give Jimmy Hamilton a job. Jimmy was at the restaurant, outside. The units 450 and 451 were put together to make the restaurant. There was a 20' wide deck about 100' long wrapped around the building. One night when Jimmy was playing, Dizzie Gillespie came to see him and ended up playing his trumpet down on the fourth green.

At that time there was a jitney you could call that would pick you up from your villa and take you to the beach. The staff was very cooperative and pleasant. They were well trained.

Originally, CC ran and controlled the golf course, beach, pool and villas in the rental pool. The owner's association just controlled the privately owned villas. George Demas was one of the first presidents of the owners' association. He was a great guy. (He had gone to Columbia and played football there. He had lots of questions. He was the attorney that sold Paramount Pictures to Gulf and Western and was one of the first to do stock buyouts. He worked under a lot of pressure and died young. He was a Greek and never forgot where he came from or put on airs.)

With income dropping, McKenna and Coombs, both owners, came up to NC to buy the property. The property was sold for \$1 and the \$2.3 million loan was assumed by RAI. That was 1974. About that time, I sold Romney point for \$250,000 to George Cassis, a St. Louis MO architect who operated all over the world. Before that sale was completed the sale price was reduced to \$175,000. He lost interest in the area and sold the land later.

There may be some copies left somewhere of the early brochures. They were first class literature. They cost us \$5 a piece way back then. People would see the architecture and say "what is that?" (Our friend, Betty Skeoch, said that the Reef was called the chicken coops by the local people. Betty Dickinson says she called it snaggle tooth ridge. The Brunos, who rented at the beginning, say that they did not realize the genius of the architect who ensured that 100 villas all had views of the Caribbean.)

There were lots of good and interesting people on St. Croix then. The area above the ridge, we called GE hill because of all the GE executives living there from Schenectady. Gardener Dove was a sailor in real estate with Farchette. I knew Ted Dale too. Captain No No worked here at the Reef and was a night guard at one time, too. The story is that he taught Llewellyn the route to sail to Buck Island. He was a constable in St. Martin after he returned there. He sailed a 30' Pierson always singing songs in French and English. .

A youngster, Tommy Neville, worked for Joe Cuff. He was a very good golfer. When I was asked to play golf with Perry Como and Giannini, the son of the

founder of Bank of America, I sent Tommy out to play with them. Como was a good golfer with a 5 or 6 handicap. Tommy never forgot that. He died far too early when he was still in his early 20's.

We had some characters working at the restaurant: Sonya, a six foot tall beautiful native girl from St. Lucia, and Bailly, who was a huge, gentle giant. One night the chef, who CV's had not been checked thoroughly enough to find out about his mental illness, attacked me, John Manning, with a knife. Mrs. Green who worked in the kitchen, stepped right between us saying "Don't you touch him. He's a family man!" and he stopped. Then he was fired.

In 1971, NC Governor, Robert Scott, his wife and daughters visited the Reef. He was attended by 4 secret service. He played golf and Polly, my wife, too them on a moonlight sail to Buck Island. He wrote us that it was a remarkable visit.