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A Short History of the Reef

by Pat Coupard

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In the spring of 1970, the day before he was to return home, **John Walley** drove out to the East end of St. Croix. The road was paved only as far as Southgate, and continuing on the dirt road, he was surprised to see large earth moving machines at work on an emerging golf course at Teague Bay. He had been looking for a vacation place in the islands for some years before he found, that morning, a new project called the Reef being built by the Robbins brothers, Grover and Harry, of Blowing Rock, NC.

Their corporation, Carolina Caribbean had developed several resorts in the southern United States, among them, Hound Ears and Banner Elk in NC. Positioned above the small bay, The Reef was intended to consist of five sections, over 200 villas, of one and two bedroom units to serve as condominiums and also as hotel accommodations.

Not long after, John Walley, bought his one bedroom villa for \$65,000. Just before hurricane Hugo, in 1989, it might have sold for perhaps \$175,000. In Section IV, the two bedroom villas pre Hugo were valued at \$300,000. Barbara Benner says that each villa had a different price depending on its location. The two bedroom units were as high as \$98,000, while the one bedroom units went from \$38,000 to \$65,000. Barbara Bruno, an early guest at the Reef, now an owner, tells us that there were several furnishing packages for the villas that also affected the prices. They included not only furniture but china, silver, linens, and crystal!

Having planned the Reef as a resort, the developers were somewhat more interested in that aspect of the operation than in the sale of the condos, which were sold with the understanding that they would be used for several weeks by the owners and rented by the resort managers to vacationers for the balance of the year. At that time, there were locks on the doors of each bedroom and the living room/kitchen door so that one might rent only one bedroom, one bedroom and the living room area or the entire villa.

The land which The Reef occupies was bought in the 1950's from the Skov family, members of which still live above the 7th and 9th fairways. Originally the developers planned for both a convention center and an airstrip. Mrs. Zell, one member of the Skov family, recalls that planes occasionally took off and landed at The Reef until "one took out the fence and the goats escaped. "That," she says, "was the end of the airstrip."

The Skov goats were not alone in their curiosity about the newcomers to the neighborhood. Betty Skeoch, a forthright Scotswoman and long time Cruzan recalled that the locals referred to the Reef as "the chicken coops," while Betty Dickinson reports that "Snaggle Tooth Ridge" was another not entirely complimentary nickname. "At first everything looked ugly and a hodge-podge. We did not realize until much later what the architect wanted to accomplish," say Barbara and Tony Bruno. "All of the villas have a nice view of the Caribbean with good visual privacy." Now, 35 years later, the architect, Bruce McCathy, from Kingsport, Tennessee, has been fully vindicated. Not only did he win awards for his design, but he' also won the admiration and appreciation of other architects who have lived or visited The Reef, to say nothing of scores of satisfied home owners.

In 1971, Allain Fevrier, our golf course supervisor came to work at The Reef and has been tending the course and the golfers with efficiency and good humor ever since. One owner, who was here during Hugo, recalls the eerie silence on the morning after the storm, being suddenly broken by the sound of a power mower. Allain had come all the way from his

home at the other end of the island, with trees and power poles lying across the roads, to be sure that the course was all right. What better opportunity to do the mowing? Arthur Kohdra, a maintenance supervisor, was hired in 1975. He says that he has now worked for nine managers. We're lucky to have two such dedicated men on our staff.

Old timers remember with nostalgia and regret the long pier from the beach which was demolished by Hugo and never rebuilt. It was in place along with the beautifully landscaped pool and a restaurant in units 450 and 451 (which also housed the offices of executive director Don Manning) as Carolina Caribbean began bringing prospective buyers to The Reef.

"In the early days," remembers Don Manning, "we called the area above the ridge GE Hill because of all the executives from Schenectady living there. I knew Gardiner Dove, a fabulous sailor, and Ted Dale too." Ted Dale, a handsome and romantic figure, had sailed his boat, The Comanche, from the states and stayed. He opened and ran the Comanche Hotel and Restaurant which was very popular. "Captain No No, an island legend, worked for a while at the Reef. The story is that he taught (the now equally famous) Llewellyn the route to sail to Buck Island. The captain sailed a 30 foot Pierson, always singing songs in French and English. Good sailors are always celebrities on this island.

"Maureen O'Hara's husband, Charlie Blair, owned Antilles Air. She was unbelievably beautiful in person with a wonderful personality and unpretentious, too. If the man who was supposed to gas up the planes did not show up, she would just pump gas as necessary."

"I remember once when I went to Jacques, a true Frenchman, for a hair cut, that Victor Borge walked in with a Bloody Mary that he had gotten from the bar across the street. When he saw a number of people in the shop waiting for Jacques, he went out and returned with Bloody Marys for all of us and proceeded to put on an impromptu half hour show."

The early '70's" were a busy time at The Reef. At first, units 450 and 451 were combined together as a restaurant. For a short while the office was also in that space. When the office building was done it housed the offices of Don Manning, Joe Cuff, the hotel manager, Tony Shimatero, the manager of the condos and grounds, and Bill Hartnet, the chief accountant. There were four or five women in the office, secretaries and accounting clerks and during the construction phase, there were sizable construction and landscape crews.

Part of the reason that the golf course was in such good condition then was that each night many thousand gallons of water were put on the greens and fairways. The units were never planned with cisterns because there were five or six excellent wells. When the demand on the wells increased, the water became brackish and could not be used for drinking and the first reverse osmosis plant was built. It operated with diesel fuel, but often failed and would not be working for several days at a time. One early resident recalled that it seemed that there was never a day without a power failure when they visited.

The resort aspect made for many arrangements now long gone. For example there was a jitney that residents could call for a ride down to the beach. At one time or another, David Hamilton and Dennis Tyson, who later became guards at the front gate, were drivers of that jitney. Dennis also worked as a starter at the golf course. If you look at the east end of the office building, you will see a small concrete pad on the ground where at one time the starter worked. With the hotel in operation, there was a laundry service and daily maid

service. Until the early 80's, owner could still avail themselves of a laundry service for towels and linens - very convenient since none of the villas had washers or dryers at that time.

Between 1968 and 1972, CCC stock which had started at \$2 a share had soared to \$70 a share. A charter airline brought in 200 visitors at a time to stay at The Reef where they were welcomed at the airport with drinks and the music of a steel band.

Another selling point was the restaurant which Barbara Benner says was "marvelous." Don Manning recalls that he gave Jimmy Hamilton, a well remembered saxophonist his first job on St. Croix. "He played on the 20' wide deck that wrapped around the building. One night when Jimmy was playing, Dizzie Gillespie came to see him and ended up playing his trumpet, while sitting on the fourth green, for the delighted diners." No evidence that the moon was full that night, but I like to think so.

"We had some real island characters working at the restaurant," says Don. Sonya was a handsome six foot tall girl from St. Lucia. Bailly was a huge, gentle giant. One night the chef, whose references had not been checked with sufficient diligence, attacked me 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 the chef stopped," and was promptly fired. John Walley heard another version that the cook was involved with the girl friend of a Mafioso. When the chef's romance came to light, he decamped to parts unknown, a footnote to Reef history.

In the early 70's, to enter Section I, it was necessary to go through lighted gate posts from Meggie Hill Road. The entrance from the coastal road was much as it is now but one could not drive from Section IV to Section I. That road was put in when a Governor's conference was scheduled at Grapetree Bay Hotel. Those at the Reef thought that there would be a lot of rentals generated by the conference and for that reason the road from Section IV to Section I was put in. Ironically, there may have been only three or four rentals from that event. There was an additional entrance by what was called the pantry store, now Just in Case Deli, that accessed both Sections I and IV.

The Grapetree Bay Hotel was developed by Fairleigh Dickinson and Bob Lodge. It was designed by a Chinese architect. The guests departed with wonderful memories as well as the pictures from the wall and the Danish wooden door knobs unscrewed from the doors to their rooms. Don Manning recalls that Fairleigh Dickinson thought of buying the land which is now Villa Madeleine to build 9 more holes of golf to be available for the hotel guests and to adjoin the Reef's golf course. Betty Dickinson, Fairleigh's widow, said that she had never heard of that. Allain Fevrier recalls a jitney bringing hotel guests over the hill to play golf.

Don Cady and Lon Southerland, whose father then owned Southerland Tours, built the Grapetree Beach Hotel, now Divi Carina Bay. The Bay hotel has never been rebuilt after being devastated by hurricane Hugo. It was very beautiful in its early days," says Don Coupard, who visited it with Pat in 1959, when the hotel was operating but not quite finished. "We drove across the island from Southgate through cane fields to get there," he recalls.

In 1972, a bizarre and tragic incident occurred at the Fountain Valley resort that was to have a devastating effect on St. Croix's tourism industry in general and on The Reef. Five or six men came out of the bush near the clubhouse and shot some golfers and then they went to the golf shop and killed a woman substituting for an employee at the golf shop and injured others. Barbara Benner recalls that she and her late husband, Buss, were showing

guests around the island on that day. "We had a flat tire and that made it too late to stop for lunch at the golf course as we planned or we would have been there when it happened. At that time, we were not much concerned about what we heard, but The New York Times" took the story and would not let it go," she recalls. The story is that although some of the killers were sent to jail, the leader escaped from a marshal transporting him and by hijacking a plane made it to Cuba.

After the Fountain Valley incident, the real estate and resort market disintegrated. "We were still spending a lot of money operating the hotel and golf course" said Don Manning. Eastern Airlines cancelled flights to the island and were advising people not to come here. The resort business went way down. Some prospective buyers at The Reef opted to lose their deposit rather than complete the purchase."

Further development ceased and Carolina Caribbean went into bankruptcy. Two owners, McKenna and Coombs, went to North Carolina to buy the property for \$1 and assumption of the \$2.3 million dollar mortgage which was essentially the value of the unsold villas. One day when we were sitting on our patio, Bert Demas, the widow of an early president, George Demas, stopped to say that she used to own our villa, recalls Don Coupard. Actually they owned not only ours but they owned several other villas, paying condo fees on all of them, to keep The Reef afloat until the remaining villas could be sold.

That was the beginning of a long hard time during which the owners took over the management. Annual meetings were held in different cities on the mainland such as New York and Boston. "Very often the manager would go to the meeting "off island" and never come back to the Reef," recalls Allain Fevrier.

There have been many owners who have worked very hard as board members and as presidents of the board to save the Reef. Today it is in good financial condition and the camaraderie and community spirit is a result of all of their combined contributions in time, effort and money.

Note: these essays are from interviews of a number of people. As listed in the earlier, *The Reef: A Botanical History*, they include conversations with: John Walley, Don & Polly Manning, Barbara Benner, Tony and Barbara Bruno and long time employees, Allain Fevrier and Arthur Kodra. One of the several authors who lived at the Reef over the years, Eleanor Coombs, wrote some history of the Reef. Possibly someone will find a copy to amplify what I am now learning through interviews and peoples' memories. Efforts have been made to be as accurate as possible but some events are clouded by rumor and hazy recollections. Additions and corrections as well as further reminiscences will be welcomed.

My hard working editor has been Libby Graham our frequent winter time visitor whom many of you have met. Thank her if this story is comprehensible but errors are all the fault of the scribe, Pat Coupard.

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