

SIR EMILE GUMBS OF ANGUILLA

BY: Will Johnson

I was passing through Miami airport (May 22nd, 2010) on my way back from Guatemala when I got a call from my friend Sir Emile Gumbs, former Chief Minister of Anguilla.

I have known Emile since 1977 when I was Commissioner and Acting Administrator of Saba. Anguilla was to receive its new status with England and I was invited to attend the ceremony. He was Minister of Communications and Works in the Ronald Webster led Government at the time. Emile occupied leadership positions in politics in Anguilla for twenty seven years from 1967 to 1994 when he retired from active politics. My wife Lynne, my baby son Teddy and I stayed at the guesthouse of Jeremiah Gumbs. No close relation of Emile's, Jeremiah was quite a flamboyant character and played a part in the Anguilla revolution. Emile took care of us and gave us a tour of what was then Anguilla. He and his Canadian wife also had us over for dinner in his ancestral home in Sandy Ground. The old generator which gave him some light a few times a week was from an old schooner. It was a noisy affair and he told me that he gave lights to his immediate neighbours who were elated to have a "naked" light bulb in the house. A couple of times during the dinner he had to run downstairs with his young son Laurie to turn back on the engine while we sat in the dark waiting for the lights to come back on. At the time Anguilla had no electricity, a series of bad dirt roads and no such thing as a restaurant. On St. Maarten people used to make fun of the Anguilla people about these things. One story told was that someone from Anguilla who worked in St. Thomas had brought back with him electrical wires and a light bulb. He wired his house and installed the light bulb in the ceiling. He then invited his neighbours to witness the miracle he had seen in St. Thomas. At the appropriate moment he turned on the switch and of course no light came on. Another one was that a man working on Aruba received a letter from his mother in Anguilla telling him that she had a wish to taste this thing they called ice. He wrote her back and told her not to worry that when he came home he would make her wish come true. When he arrived home and opened his trunk the ice he had packed had melted and soaked everything inside the trunk. His mother's wish to taste ice had to wait for another day. (Blame Allan Busby for this one "tis he tell me so.") Well no one can make such jokes about Anguilla now. If you listen to Bill O'Reilly then Anguilla is the place to be and the joke now is on St. Martin.

Emile's wife was not amused to hear that little Saba had four restaurants (if you included Bugaloo's place) and 24 hour-a-day electricity. But of course that was the period when Anguilla had just got out from under St. Kitts. It is rumored that Great Britain gave money to build a pier on Anguilla and that St. Kitts had built the pier at Sandy Point and named it the "Anguilla pier" as there was where the schooners and sloops docked up from the neighbouring islands to pick up cargo and passengers.

Emile and I had an indirect family relationship in that one of his uncles was married to Genevra Simmons, a cousin of my mother's. Emile's uncle died in a fire in the LAGO oil refinery. I think it was when the German U-boats attacked the refinery during the Second World War He left Genevra a widow with two small children who are Emile's first cousins. She later married a doctor from the Dominican

Republic if I remember correctly. Geneva was one beautiful woman and kept her beauty well into old age when I first met her in Richmond Hill, New York many years ago.



Schooner "Warspite" at Sombrero Island.

I have the good fortune to have been personally acquainted with and friends of all the Chief Ministers of Anguilla, starting with the Honourable Ronald Webster who I knew from when he owned Mary's Fancy plantation on St. Martin and long before the revolution. I was a sort of field marshal for Claude Wathey and Clem Labega when Anguilla had its revolution to break away from St. Kitts. I used to work in the Receivers Office downstairs in the Old Court House. One day Ronald came and said to me that Claude had sent him to me to explain about elections. That is the way Claude operated. If things failed my head would have been on the block as Claude would have said that I got myself in trouble by interfering in Anguilla's business. But when it succeeded Claude got the glory. But that is the way things work in the world. Anyway I told Ronald to meet me at Capt. Hodge's Guesthouse after work and I would explain him everything. As soon as Ronald left I rushed up by the Census Office and Mr. Constant Williams and Mr. Jocelyn Arndell gave me all the details on how elections are conducted and that a referendum (unknown to us at the time) could be organized in the same way. By the time Ronald came to meet me, I was the expert on how to conduct a referendum. That was as far as I was involved in the Anguilla revolution. All I know is that there were four people voted against secession from St. Kitts and some sixteen hundred voted to secede and Claude got the glory for the good advice and support he had given to Ronald. He did of course and since I was just a subordinate I carried out orders. And guess what. It was a learning lesson for me applied in later years to some of my subordinates.

I am also good friends of the present Chief Minister the Honourable Hubert Hughes and the recent Chief Minister Osborne Fleming.

I have been invited on a number of occasions to Anguilla Day and was able to renew my acquaintance with Emile. I remember once being invited to a St. Martin Day celebration and staying at the Grand Case Beach Hotel. Emile was there and expressed great admiration for my book "Tale's From My Grandmother's Pipe". He as an old schooner captain himself and had known many of the former Saba captains and their lovely schooners. As a matter of fact when he called me in Miami it was to tell me a story of when his great grandmother died in 1936. As an eight year old boy he was privileged to go on board the Saba schooner the "Marion Belle Wolfe "(sister ship to the "Mona Marie") so that his folks could negotiate to carry back some people to St. Kitts who had attended the funeral of his great grandmother. At that time large Saban owned schooners used to carry salt from Anguilla to Guyana and some of them were also involved in carrying workers from Anguilla to work in the cane field of the Dominican Republic. One of those Captains was Capt. John Leverock Johnson a great-uncle of mine who was the father of Romney on St. Barths. Emile comes from a long line of schooner captains and shipbuilders. His mother was a Carty (sister of the well-known West Indian Methodist Circuit preacher the Reverend Leonard Carty). As a matter of fact the house in Sandy Ground in which Emile lives belonged to his grandfather Capt. Arthur Carty.



Hon. Ronald Webster with Will Johnson in background.

When I went to Anguilla in 1960 after hurricane "Donna" with the M.V. "Antilia" together with Lt. Governor Japa Beaujon the schooner the "Warspite" was in the harbor. It was still there when I visited in 1977. When I told my uncle Captain Charles Reuben Simmons (then in his eighties) that the "Warspite" was still around he said that the older I got the stupider I became. He claimed that the "Warspite" was an old schooner already when he was a little boy and that there was no way the schooner could still be around.

On another occasion for St. Barths Day Emile Gumbs, Leo Chance and I ended up that night in a restaurant in Gustavia swapping old time stories. Emile told me several stories which I don't think he will mind that I pass on. When he was Captain of the family owned schooner the "Warspite" he used to transport salt from family operated salt pans on Anguilla to Trinidad for use in the oil fields there. On the way back he would transport general cargo between the islands. On one of those trips back up from Trinidad the pump on his schooner went bad and he had to put into St. Vincent on a Saturday night. The following day being a Sunday with all stores closed he went ashore and was informed that a Portuguese descended St. Vincentian might be able to help him with a new pump. So he went by the house above the business and told his story. He did not have enough funds with him to pay for the new pump. The storekeeper asked him if that schooner in the harbor was the "Warspite" by any chance. Long story short, when Emile told him that it had been in the family for more than fifty years already (built in 1905), the storekeeper told him to take the pump on credit. He said that any family that could keep a schooner that long and still looking like brand new could be trusted to pay for a small item like a pump. On his next trip down to Trinidad Emile stopped in at St. Vincent and paid for the pump of course.



Emile Gumbs

Sir Emile Gumbs, former Chief Minister of Anguilla

Another story he told me on that occasion which I may have mentioned before, but which belongs with his story is the following. He told me that once he was transporting a load of lumber from Sandy Point on St. Kitts to Mr. Cyrus Wathey on St. Martin. Late afternoon the French Canadian Roman Catholic Priest then stationed on Anguilla boarded the schooner. Emile offered him supper but he declined saying that he had just shared a meal with his colleague the Catholic Priest at Sandy Point.

On arrival in the Great Bay harbor the next morning Emile offered the good father some breakfast. He however decline as he said he would most probably have breakfast with the Roman Catholic priest in Philipsburg. Emile told him that he would send the small boat to pick him up exactly at 12 noon as he would be finished with unloading the schooner by that time. He told the priest that the Roman Catholic rectory was located opposite the church and sent him on his way.

Promptly at noon the priest was picked up on the beach and brought back to the "Warspite". Emile told me that the priest was laughing when he came on board and told him how embarrassed he was as to something which had happened to him ashore. When he went ashore there was a Mass in progress. He did not want to disturb the Mass and besides he was feeling quite hungry by then. He reckoned the Dutch priest would not mind that he helped himself to some breakfast. This was in the early nineteen fifties and no one on St. Martin ever locked their house then. So the priest entered the house across the street and found the kitchen with a well stocked refrigerator and with a stove. In those days they would have been a kerosene fridge and stove. My mother, a six foot one inch woman and good looking besides, had cooked on wood in the yard most of her life. When my older brother's bought her a, two burner kerosene stove and a second hand kerosene fridge from her first cousin Eugenius Johnson, she said that she could now die in peace as she never expected to have such luxury in her house. Try and ask a woman to cook on wood today or even on a kerosene stove.

Anyway I got sidetracked as usual but when the priest sat down to breakfast, he looked up and to his amazement a good looking young woman seemingly perplexed was standing there staring him down. His first reaction was: "What would the priest be doing with a good looking maid like that?" Upon enquiry as to whether she worked there she informed him that she lived there. Worse yet! He said "You mean you live here with the priest?" She answered him:"This is my house, the priest lives next door!" It was one of the Peterson girls (daughter of Mr. William B. Peterson) whose house was opposite the church where Boolchand's is next to the Roman Catholic Rectory. Emile said he and the priest had a good laugh over the embarrassment which the good priest went through. But it all ended well as the young lady let him finish his breakfast of eggs and bacon and then took him next door to meet the local priest. For me it is always nice to meet up with people like Emile and swap old time stories. He is 82 now he informs me. I remember having lunch at Governor Huckles official residence in the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas) in Port Stanley in 2007. The Governor was in London but his wife Helen graciously hosted us and together with the Military Commander gave us a tour outside the town to see the penguins, seals and other wild life. At the lunch we discussed Emile's upcoming 80th birthday and the pleasant times the Huckles had enjoyed with Emile and his family when Governor Huckle served on Anguilla.

Regrettably the "Warspite" was lost during hurricane "KLAUS" in 1985. For many years the old schooner had the contract to carry the men from Anguilla to work on the lighthouse on Sombrero. Emile can tell you any number of stories related to that period.

Sometime back his son Laurie was on Saba with a boat and called me to convey greetings from his father. There was insufficient time to pass at my house. I have not seen him since he was "knee high to a grasshopper" as they would say.

I have many good friends in Anguilla. People like Maurice Conner at whose guesthouse I stayed for a week with my family in the eighties when it was just built. I have many fond memories of visiting there. Even had the privilege of being a guest at the famous "Mallihouana Hotel" on no less than two occasions and carried there by Chief Minister Osborne Fleming himself. Once when I was a guest for Anguilla Day, Emile came to the airport to see me off and to present me with a nice book on Anguilla's history. I informed him that the government had given me the same book the day before and that he should give the one he had brought me to another friend of his. When I got home I saw a familiar person with a Panama hat sitting behind the Honourable Ronald Webster. I realized that it was a photo of me taken on the occasion of a previous Anguilla Day. I called Emile to check it out. I told him that even Anguilla could not keep us Saba people out of their business. We had a good laugh about it.

Ever since I used to issue clearances for the Anguilla captains at the Receivers office on St. Martin in the early nineteen sixties, I developed a great deal of respect for the enterprising spirit of the Anguilla people. I later became friends with the various airplane pilots like aforementioned Maurice Conner and the late Captain Lloyd who died tragically and who was then much too young. That enterprising spirit of the Anguilla people is still there. I recall an interview on television lately in which the Honourable Osborne Fleming on going into retirement informed the Anguillan people that a bank he had started with five million dollars now had assets of 700 million dollars and that it had been legally done, and I believe him. Such are most Anguillans.

Although I have known Emile for so many years I have never enquired after his business. He lives contentedly with his second wife, a lady from St. Vincent who he had a crush on as a young man.

Like all true Anguillans Emile loves the traditional sail boat races and lives in Sandy Ground close to where the sailing action is. He can give an expert assessment on the chances of the various boats to win the race, the right wind conditions necessary, and the skill of the boat crew to bring in the gold. May he enjoy many more years in his beloved Sandy Ground on beautiful Anguilla.
