



# BAHAMIAN FRAGMENTS

## BITS AND PIECES FROM THE HISTORY OF

### THE BAHAMAS

- [Grand Bahama in 1887](#) from L. D. Powle *The Land of the Pink Pearl or Recollections of Life in the Bahamas.*
- [Grand Bahama in 1891](#) from Stark's *History and Guide to the Bahama Islands.*
- [Grand Bahama in 1917](#) from Amelia Defries *In a Forgotten Colony*
- [Grand Bahama in 1924](#) from *The Tribune Handbook*
- [Grand Bahama in 1926](#) from Mary Mosley *The Bahamas Handbook.*
- [Grand Bahama in 1931](#) from *Nassau and the Treasure Islands of the Bahamas*
- [Grand Bahama in 1934](#) from Maj. H. M. Bell *Bahamas: Isles of June*
- [The Bahamas in 1964](#) from Benedict Thielen *The Bahamas-Golden Archipelago*
- [Grand Bahama in 1967](#) *Moral Panic, Gambling, and the Good Life*
- [Historical Sources Page](#)

## Ann Leslie "A Month in the Life of ... the Bahamas"

Queen, 25 Oct. 1967, pp. 62- 67

**It is ten o'clock one morning and I find myself drinking rum and Coke in the sumptuous sitting room of a DC3 converted at the cost of £35,000...**

It has the Roberts Realty emblem emblazoned on its tail and a Roberts Realty air-hostess in her Roberts Realty uniform tittupping about in the white and gold interior. A group of prospective buyers, salesmen, myself and a man called Sam are going along to see Great Harbour Cay, in the Berry Islands, which is now owned by—well, of course—Roberts Realty.

Sam is a gentleman of Levantine appearance, gold cuff-links and cigar, who lives in Miami on Biscayne Bay and is here as a friend of Lou. Lou is Lou Chesler, a huge, flamboyant Canadian financier whose career in Florida real estate has been spectacular.

He was also involved with the Grand Bahama Development Company until Wallace Groves bought him out, and he was variously accused of introducing to the Bahamian gambling scene such notorious/ hoodlums as Meyer Lansky and Dino Cellini.

Be that as it may, Chesler's real estate operations have proved profitable for all concerned and it is highly unlikely that Great Harbour Cay will be an exception.

Sam's come to look around, and right now he's not enjoying himself. He has an ulcer and he asks the Roberts Realty hostess for some milk. The Roberts Realty varnish on her smile cracks a little: 'Milk? Oh, sir, I'm so very sorry we don't have any *milk*. Some gin and tonic? Vodka and lime?' Sam mutters 'Jeez' and falls asleep. He alone among us is not over-impressed by the sumptuous setting, the islands slipping away under us.

We arrive on the runway which stretches past the Tamboo Club and reception center for Roberts Realty clients. There is practically nothing else on the development at the moment, but all the buildings are to be constructed in the same curious candle-snuffer style.

We drive around the island: 'That's where the eighteen-hole golf course is going to be. Five of the fairways face on to 2,000 feet of beach property ... There's 100 acres set aside for hotels, golf course and so on. 1,700 single-

family residences round about *here*, 3,400 multi-family residences located *here*, two school sites *here* ...'

'Listen, this island has everything. Lou knows what he's doing. It's just the most beautiful island in the world. I'm not exaggerating. We don't have to sell this land, we just have to bring people here and it sells itself!'

Bill Wright, who comes from Peterborough, is already installed on the island to supervise the work. We go to his house to have drinks. The house is beautiful, but Sam thinks Miami does things better: 'I'm telling you, I've got a bar in Biscayne Bay which is the size of this whole *house*!'

Sam comes alive when the talk turns to the absent but dearly-beloved Lou: 'I'm not exaggerating! I lost \$1,000,000 one night to Lou when I was gambling. He's just the best gambler in the world!'

'Now, I'm telling you I'm the best salesman in the world, and Lou could sell my shoes right off my feet and I wouldn't know it. That man's got real *class*!'

But the one thing the gambling Lou is not selling is gambling. 'Great Harbour Cay is seventy-two miles from Freeport and about the same from Nassau. We want this to be an exclusive family type development. If they want to gamble they can fly to the casinos:

Lots on the island will cost from between £ 1,071 to £ 14,286 per acre or three-quarters-of-an-acre lot. Beach-front property will average £ 70 a front foot and the development, which will take about three years to complete, is to cost an estimated £ 17,000,000.

We have lunch of locally-caught lobster. 'I'm not exaggerating! This is the best food you'll get in the Bahamas!'

We whip through Bullocks Harbour, the tiny settlement mostly composed of fishermen and a disproportionately large number of bars. 'Do we own this, Bill? No, I thought not. The people in the Berry Islands, Ann, are known to be among the nicest in the Bahamas. I'm not exaggerating!'

For land that sells itself, it gets an extraordinary amount of help from the loyal henchmen of Roberts Realty. So it is with some exhaustion that we pile back into the DC3 for the flight back to Nassau.

A German couple have survived the entire day of salesman's poetry without a smile. On the other hand, a woman who arrived grim-faced, in unsuitable brown silk, high heels, stockings and hat complete with veil is now bare-footed, covered in sand, her hat full of sea-water and prattling happily: 'My children, well they'll just love this darling, darling place. They'll just love to water-ski in the winter and snow-ski in the spring. Why, right now they're in Aspen, Colorado, ski-ing. I'm going right there to join them and tell them all about it ...'

The salesman nods kindly. Clearly, *that* one has been rung up on the cash register. Only Sam remains unimpressed and glum. As we wait for take-off, he looks out across the shimmering run-way, the palms and scrub-covered landscape, and says: 'Reminds me of one of those movies, you know,

where everyone is running away from this outpost in the African jungle.'

'Aw, come off it, Sam. You trying to ruin my pitch? Miami was a *swamp* once.'

**A Rolls-Royce is about to be passed by a big American car on a dual carriageway in Freeport, Grand Bahama ...**

Jack Hayward, vice president of the Port Authority, leans out of the Rolls' button-operated window and shouts: 'Hey, Ron, come and have dinner with us tonight at El Casino!'

'Can't! Sorry, old chap. My night for the "skim" you know!'

Howls of laughter as the cars part ways. Ron Goulding is another member of the Port Authority. Mafia jokes are whizzing around Freeport like shotgun pellets these days.

In fact, if in Grand Bahama you don't know that the 'skim' is a way of removing money from the takings of gambling casinos; that Meyer Lansky is a dubious gentleman operating in Miami; that 'Uncle Dino' is Dino Cellini, expelled as an undesirable from Britain and the Bahamas; and that the phrase 'consultant fees' is liable to get you funny looks—well, you must have been living in a cave for the past few months.

There is a stunning simplicity in the attitudes of many making their pile in Freeport—a conviction that making money is patriotic in itself, and that anything that seeks to hamper this activity can be considered in some way subversive to the rules of the place.

The fact that most of the people thinking this way are American and not British is just part of the nuttiness of this most nutty island in the whole chain.

Freeport is a huge, brass-tongued assault/ on the mind and the senses with about as much good taste about it as a dance-hall girl in a Wild West saloon. It is ugly and repellant and at the same time strangely exhilarating.

Born out of a large, graceless island of about 400 square miles, it was cradled in a most extraordinary agreement between the Bahamian Government and Wallace Groves, a sixty-five-year-old American financier. This was known as the Hawksbill Creek Act of 1955, under which 50,000 acres were sold to Groves' Port Authority for £1 an acre. Subsequent purchases brought the total area up to 211 square miles. Freeport was to be guaranteed exemption from any sort of Bahamian taxes until 1990 and from customs and import duties on business materials until 2054. Sir Stafford Sands was Groves' lawyer and a member of the Government's Executive Council.

Earlier this year, the largest casino in the Western hemisphere was opened: El Casino., a great white Moorish meringue of a gambling mansion. At night, its domes and turrets—from which no muezzin calls to worship any Allah—the crap tables and the stick-men are floodlit in the colours of neapolitan ice-creams.

Inside the rows of fruit machines chatter desolately in a wilderness of bright lights and garish colours. The Ladies and Gents are called Sultanas and Sultans, and the cocktail bar is called the Kasbar.

To get there, you can, if you like, hop on a red double-decker London bus, which grumbles along looking slightly foolish amid the American cars and the palm trees, without its gray London streets and skies. Not far from El Casino is The Pub In The Mall, which, to quote the publicity men, is 'an-authentically-styled old English pub', where you are served by 'authentically-costumed serving wenches'. Here the Ladies and Gents are styled M'Ladies and M' Lords. The merrie serving wenches pad about in tennis shoes, long skirts and low-cut blouses through which their bras gleam like white bomb-casings.

One such wench is thirty-two-year-old Doreen Dorman from Manchester, who has been in Freeport about twelve months and is very happy here. She earns between £60 and £80 a week, tax-free of course, and shares an apartment with another Manchester girl. It costs about £78 a month.

'It's a nice place for the young, Freeport. It's got this exciting atmosphere of being new, a place of the future. Listen, The Pub isn't very full right now. Why don't you come back again during Happy Hour? It really fills up then.'

Happy Hour is a skillful American-inspired device used extensively in Freeport to get people well-oiled for an evening's jollifications. Drinks consumed during this time are all one price and usually half-price at that. During The Pub's Happy Hour, they serve genuine Olde Englishe delicacies, such as conch fritters, free.

To complete the wild mixture of styles in Freeport, we have the multi-million dollar International Bazaar, yet to be completed, which aims at re-creating different areas of the world: Hong Kong, the Middle East, North Africa, Copenhagen, Tokyo, Montmartre and Granada.

[Next>](#)





# BAHAMIAN FRAGMENTS

## BITS AND PIECES FROM THE HISTORY OF

### THE BAHAMAS

- [Grand Bahama in 1887](#) from L. D. Powle *The Land of the Pink Pearl or Recollections of Life in the Bahamas.*
- [Grand Bahama in 1891](#) from Stark's *History and Guide to the Bahama Islands.*
- [Grand Bahama in 1917](#) from Amelia Defries *In a Forgotten Colony*
- [Grand Bahama in 1924](#) from *The Tribune Handbook*
- [Grand Bahama in 1926](#) from Mary Mosley *The Bahamas Handbook.*
- [Grand Bahama in 1931](#) from Nassau and the Treasure Islands of the Bahamas
- [Grand Bahama in 1934](#) from Maj. H. M. Bell *Bahamas: Isles of June*
- [The Bahamas in 1964](#) from Benedict Thielen *The Bahamas-Golden Archipelago*
- [Grand Bahama in 1967](#) *Moral Panic, Gambling, and the Good Life*
- [Historical Sources Page](#)

## Ann Leslie "A Month in the Life of ... the Bahamas"

Queen, 25 Oct. 1967, pp. 62- 67

### The King of Freeport is, of course, Wallace Groves ...

In the throes of a libel suit, he is quiet, cautious, perhaps understandably on the look-out for 'knockers' who bring up the subject of his two-year prison sentence some years ago in a fraud case in the States. 'Don't take a photograph of me like that!' he days, "You're trying to make me look sinister!"

He has succeeded where previous attempts to lure tourists to Grand Bahama have failed. 'Your Sir Billy Butlin tried to set up one of his holiday camps here some years ago, but it failed. He didn't fully appreciate, perhaps, that the American tourist does not like to be too organized, and what he does like is to play plenty of golf.'

He is liable to get it in Freeport: there are already three eighteen-hole golf courses here and another three are planned.

An estimated £140,000,000-plus has been invested in Freeport/Lucaya, and tourism has in a mere three years soared from 26,000 visitors to an estimated 300,000 visitors. But every statistic one produces in Freeport is liable to change and to escalate in size overnight. 'Every time you sneeze here, you find there's another hotel gone up.'

The hotels are bold, brassy, American in style and service. Operation Goodwill has been launched in order to get the fairly stolid Bahamians suddenly transformed from poor fishermen into over-tipped waiters, to improve what is rather inaccurately termed their 'traditional friendly hospitality'. It is badly needed in some quarters.

Boom days have indeed come to the islanders—men like taxi-driver Kenneth Dawkins, who reckons with hard work in a good week to be able to earn £140. But the cost of living has rocketed and most of the Negroes still live in shabby little Eight Mile Rock or the new housing development of Hawksbill. They are thus not always quite as grateful for the new prosperity as they are expected to be by the entrepreneurs.

Freeport's night-life is razzamatazz Las Vegas-style with top-line cabaret stars from the States. But, let no one doubt it, gambling has been the biggest reason for its success.



In a recent poll conducted by the *Daily Tribune* among visitors to Freeport, the chief conclusion was: 'Though sun and sea are an attraction, the general tourist reaction to Freeport was that of a frontier town lacking beauty, charm, good food, good service, good shopping or anything to do. The only redeeming factor was gambling'. The editorial reluctantly came to the conclusion that perhaps the Government should have some share in the profits of gambling, estimated at more than £7, 000,000, 'a move which should substantially strengthen the financial future even if it does not improve the moral climate'. And who in the Bahamas would seriously doubt where the priorities lie?

**One of the many people who would lose his job if gambling were abolished is croupier Tom Gerrard ..**

Gerrard, a stocky blond Englishman of thirty-six with a taste for tough-guy talk, is sun-bathing outside his house in Freeport with his wife Cornelia and his three children, Jane, Tracy and three-year-old Theseus Hereward: 'I called him that because I think Theseus and Hereward are the greatest heroes of our time'.

"I trained at Dino Cellini's croupiers' school in London and I came over here three years ago in a special plane-load of sixty nine croupiers when the first casino began operating. I like Uncle Dino. I'm sorry he got expelled.

'Is the game here straight? I can tell you that it is absolutely straight, nothing crooked about it at all. Yea, well, sure some of the Mafia boys are involved, though you won't / find their names on any of the books, you can bet your life the game *itself* is straight.'

Mind you, Gerrard is not a croupier by profession. Oh, no. He is an actor.

'Yea, but see, my face didn't fit the current fashion in the London theatre when I was trying to get jobs. I miss it though, all me old mates, Mike Caine, Alby Finney, Stanley Baker—hey, tell them to come over here some time, see old Tom, if you ever bump into them, will you? Me and Cornelia is still kooky like we always used to be, tell 'em.

'Done everything, I have. Was a clown for six-and-a-half years in a circus, then worked as a doorman at the Hilton, then in Smithfield as a porter. Another time, I was a bodyguard for Christine Keeler.'

**Jack Hayward, who came here with the first bulldozer and who owns forty per cent of the Port Authority, is probably the most influential man on the island, apart from Groves himself ...**

He is also a committed acting ham. Extraordinarily enough, there is a flourishing amateur theatre group here, doggedly planting its little cultural daffodils in the form of Pinter and Albee plays on this island of limestone and cement mixers and ringing fruit machines.

Hayward is a professional Englishman, a public schoolboy, ex-RAF, with a taste for wearing chappish blazers and that casual amateurish English charm which should not, however, fool anyone into doubting his extraordinary flair and determination.

The son of Sir Charles Hayward, head of the huge Firth-Cleveland group, he has lived in the Bahamas for twenty years, but lost nothing of his Home-Counties-and-cricket-flannels accent. He sentimentally cherishes an old London taxi, which he imported to Freeport, and he lights his garden with old streetlamps from the Richmond gas works.

The house that he and his wife Jean own on the beach at Freeport is decorated like an old country house, with quiet chintzes and the right sort of Country Life dogs bounding in and out of it. Even the swimming pool, despite its size and magnificence, contrives to look rather tasteful European, like part of an Italian water garden.

It is Hayward who is responsible for The Pub In The Mall, the plethora of portraits of the Queen in offices and shops" 'I see no point in Americans coming here if we simply end up looking like Miami!'

I comment tentatively on the white plastic theatre-organ styles of some of the architecture.

'Well, yes, hideous, isn't it! But, you see, when we took on the idea of Freeport, we were running a really terrible risk, and we were begging people to come here. Everyone now talks as if it were a dead cert success from the beginning, but in fact it was a tremendous gamble which happens to have worked out well. Well, in those days we couldn't turn down people when they wanted to build here simply because we didn't wholly admire their taste in architecture.'

Control is not something that Bahamians have taken to. And in Freeport, Grand Bahama, the town they call Las Vegas East, the town of El Casino and The Kasbar, of merrie maidens and conch fritters, of rolling dice and Happy Hour, any attempt at aesthetic control is far too late.

**There is nothing else like Freeport in the Bahamas. Just as there is nowhere else like the Bahamas...**

For the Bahamas is as individual and as eccentric, as poor and as wealthy, as ugly and as exquisite, as humble and as snobbish as the people who come to perch, however briefly, on these 700 pieces of rock.

It is these people, rather than the pieces of rock, who are the real Bahamas. This has been a month in the life of some of them.

[<Back](#)

