

Carl: We are going to be talking today with Mr. Mitchell Hepburn, the owner of Le Rendezvous in Freeport, and he is going to tell us a little bit about his experiences on Grand Bahama island. When did you first come here, Mr. Hepburn?

M. H.: I was born in 1937 right here. I grew up on the island, but was born in Eight Mile Rock. I was schooled first in Grand Bahama and then went into Nassau to St. John's College where I spent three and a half years. Then my daddy died and I had to go off to make a living.

Carl: What did you do when you came back to Grand Bahama?

M. H.: The first thing I did was to be butler and chauffeur for Dr. Gottlieb in Pine Ridge.

Carl: I saw Dr. Gottlieb and his wife over at Marsh Harbour, and as a matter of fact, they recalled those days.

M. H.: I worked for them for approximately six years, and as a matter of fact, wish they were here right now.

Carl: Well, they are very fine people, and Pine Ridge was quite an undertaking. Mr. Groves bought it when it was bankrupt and kept the thing going and gave a lot of employment to people, I suppose. Can you tell us a little bit about your experiences out there?

M. H.: Oh yes, Pine Ridge did belong to Mr. and Mrs. Groves and they had a hell of a lot of Bahamians and Turks Islanders, and they employed about 85% of the island. There was nothing else here. We worked there from nothing, for I started when I was 18, and I worked there until I was about 25 years old, working for Dr. Gottlieb.

Carl: Well, as you know, the development of Pine Ridge eventually led to the development of Freeport. Mr. Groves took the money that he made from the sale of the Abaco Lumber Company, and put it into the development of Freeport, plus a lot of money.

M. H.: Ha, I remember that - I can remember the day when the bulldozer knocked down the first pine tree running up to Tin (sp?) City, and there was nothing at all but just pine barren and they just keep on working and working their own way, and the first place they developed was Tin City, they called it. It just had a bunch of buildings for the workers; they had no restaurant or anything like that, and they keep on building and building until eventually they got a place called the Caravel Club.

Carl: Oh yes, that was probably where I first met you. Didn't you terdbar there?

M. H.: Yes, I was the bartender there - first I started off as the chef, then I was Maitre.

Carl: Because I used to come up from Nassau and spend a week or two at a time there.

M. H.: Ah, that's where I remember. Sir Stafford Sands, Charles Bethel, and all the Bethel brothers used to come down there, and I used to take good care of them. Chester Thompson, especially him, for I used to do a lot of campaigning for him. And we progressed from there. The Caravel Club was just a small motel. We started off with 8 rooms. I used to work there from 12 to 15 hours a day and loved it, and eventually it kept on growing and growing and

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M. H. : growing, and eventually they added on another four rooms to bring it to 12.

Carl: Well, it was the only place on the island, except West End, where they had any place to stay. I think they had a few fishing hole rooms down there, but they were mainly for fishermen.

M. H. : The Fishing Hole hadn't started until about 8 years after the Caravel Club, and then they started, but they didn't do too much, and then after the Fishing Hole, we got another night club which was known as the Voo Doo Club.

Carl: I remember the Voo Doo Club

M. H. : I was the one who opened it. That was when we had the first cruise ship come into Freeport harbour.

Carl: That was not far from the present Fishing Hole.

M. H. : Yes, and then Freddie Munnings took it over approximately three years after, because it was still managed by the man who owned it, but he didn't make it go, so Freddie went and tried to make a go of it, and he had it for approximately two or three years.

Carl: Let me ask you this, Mr. Hepburn. Oh, I'll call you Mitch as you have asked me to. Bahamians didn't think that Freeport would ever succeed, right? and that was from the beginning - and that included Stafford Sands and the other people in Nassau who were leaving the government. I wonder why that attitude was?

M. H. : Because I think at first no one had any confidence in Bahamians, because Bahamians were very lazy and I would say, dishonest. We were put into a position where, if we could pull a deal, we would try it. Very, very few of us in Freeport now/<sup>who</sup> can say that we start from scratch.

Carl: Bahamians have learned responsibility as the years have gone by, to a degree, have they not?

M. H. : Oh yes, very, very much, because no. 1, we took it first from our Prime Minister, we don't want to let our people down, and we are very, very proud, and after we have had our own black government, we are very, very proud and to be black. Before that, we felt very inferior. Now, we feel just like an ordinary human being.

Carl: Feel just like other people - right, which is the way it should be.

M. H. : Right, and I am proud of that, and I am so proud to be the way I am.

Carl: Well, Mitch, how did you get into the business here of Le Rendezvous?

M. H. : OK, it's a long story now, if you can hold on awhile. Like I told you, when I first started with the Gottliebs in Pine Ridge, I didn't know a thing about anything. The lady there taught me how to be a butler and chauffeur, and I had to cook, drive and serve, and as a joke. One time I served the Royal Governor with no shoes on, and I worked my way from there. Then from there I went into the Caravel Club as a chef and then they found I could serve, and then they moved me into the front, where I was bartender and Maitre, and for me to

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M. H. : get here to the Rendezvous, what happened was, it was a new French company what started it, and after they started, they hired me when the building first opened. I started off as a bartender, and when the company changed over to a private person, that lasted for only a year because they never could pay the rent. Don't quote me on that and then the owner of the ~~business~~ <sup>building</sup> decided if I would like to go into business with him. I run the business because he knows nothing about it. He put up X-amount and I put up X-amount and from there I took over and I run this. When we first took over, I used to work from nine o'clock in the morning to twelve midnight, and I have done that for about three years straight, and then it was getting to me. I started taking off two or three days of the week, and I had my sister come in. Her name is Pearl.

Carl: I know Pearl. When I worked for the Port Authority, we used to have coffee here every morning and lunch at noontime, etc., and I knew you at the Caravel Club and also here, but I did not know your name was Mitch.

M. H. : Oh yes, and another thing, and since me and this American partner of mine went into business, we own the whole of upstairs of Lafayette, the big building over there, and I am President of the company. The company was known as Bahamian Arts and Crafts.

Carl: What do you sell up there, Mitch?

M. H. : We sell just souvenirs, and a bunch of gold now. Especially when gold started going, we experimented in gold, and right now we have an English guy running it for us, but I am going to take it over myself.

Carl: Well, what future do you see for Freeport?

M. H. : Oh my God, the only thing I can see for us right now is to keep on going forward. Nothing can stop us, as long as we can get the cooperation from the ex-patriots of what we are getting now, and I am sure we will have no problem out of them.

Carl: Well, I don't think you are going to have any problem out of ex-patriots. Everything seems to be calm and smooth around here now.

M. H. : Oh yes, everything is under control and as long as Mr. and Mrs. Groves have anything to do with it (the Port Authority), I am sure we will have no problem. Even Jack Hayward or Edward St. George especially, they are very nice.

Carl: Well, Mr. Groves has put a lot of money into a project to learn how to grow conch artificially in the Bahamas. Conch is getting short in the Bahamas and it is one of the staples of the Bahamian diet, and he has scientists from the University of Miami and Harvard working down on his island - down in the Berry Islands, trying to learn how to grow conch, so that we can have a lot more conch in the Bahamas. Do you know much about conch?

M. H. : No, I am not too much of a fisherman, but I am sure if Mr. Groves ventures into it, it would be a success. Anything he puts his hands on usually turns to gold.

Carl: Tell me, what did your father do, Mitch?

M. H. : My father was a seaman - a fisherman. He lived in Eight Mile

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M. H.: Rock, and he died approximately 22 years ago.

Carl: And how large a family did he have?

M. H.: He had five boys and four girls, and all of us are still alive. My mother is very much alive, and he started off from scratch and invested a lot of money in me to send me to school and college in Nassau.

Carl: Well, that's wonderful. You have taken ~~very~~ advantage of every advantage he gave you, and you seem to be doing very well here in Freeport.

M. H.: I tell you what - with <sup>out</sup> the help of Wallace Groves and Dr. Gottlieb, I don't think I would be as far as I am right now. That is why I am always be grateful to them, and if they was to come right now and start off from scratch, I would go back and do the same thing I did from the beginning.

Carl: That's very nice of you to say that. I am sure they would be glad to hear it.

M. H.: Glad to hear it or not - I am honest and they are the most grateful people on earth, and I will always be grateful to them.

Carl: Well that's great, Mitch. It was very nice talking to you today and I am sure you came down just particularly for this interview and I appreciate that very much.

M. H.: Yes, because I am still on vacation. You should have seen me ducking through the rain. Thanks a lot for talking.