

A VIEW FROM THE DOCK

An Essay

By

R. Louis Bergeron

I saw the sailing vessels at anchor around the bay from the public pier, full of holes that a man could fall through to the water below. Next to me ^{was} the 125 foot rusting hull of a ship that was there twenty three years ago when I was standing on the same pier. The "G.H. Vanderborch, Sr.". What was her ^{was} history...who was she? Where had she come from? Why and when was she left ~~rotting~~ ^{rotting} here at the dock? Was she at all involved with the sunken ship fifty yards off the pier that only a round protrusion from the water could be seen? *of which*

I counted eight masts towering above the roughly hewn hulls bobbing in the sea. Curious I hopped on my motor scooter and followed the shore roads. The first few were paved and then to a typical Haitian rocky road where over the years the stones had become smooth and rounded from the vehicles passing over them.

As I left the pier, past the empty concession where a lone worker called to me to join him. I passed the "Annex Marine Haitienne" where men were playing loudly their seemingly continuous game of dominos. The same young, slender Haitian lady sat next to the wall of the base selling food. She had been in the same spot every day that I went to the pier. I loved going to the pier to watch the sailing boats, to talk to anyone docked there awaiting another trip back to Isle a Vache, some four kilometers out. I met people of all kinds, young children to old folks asking for money. I don't give out money and they sometimes get angry. I met a man from Belgium who is on the island with his girl friend he just flew here from the Netherlands. He, a sailor was recovering from a dismasting off the coast of Jamaica and here to spend some time. He left for ten days and was coming back to join the mapping team of divers mapping the recent find of Captain Henry Morgan's flag ship "Oxford". There was one of the partners of the dive shop, on the island from Alabama, who tells me they set up the dive shop to support their missionary efforts on the island. There is plenty of business with the two resorts that cater to the wealthy Europeans that come here.

Beyond the military base I turn onto a short road where local children move out of my way, briefly interrupting their game of soccer in the middle of the road. Over one of the many ditches where gray water flows the road ends at a beach where a

few fishing boats are propped up in the sand. Coming in on the tide fishermen put long poles at angles on all four corners of the craft. It kept the boats upright. Some the masts were steeped, others the mast lay aside the boat. Fishermen were repairing their nets as nimbly as an experienced knitter knits a sweater without looking at what she's doing, or refreshing the name on the bow with paint and a small stick. Dogs strayed through the area looking for scraps of whatever they could find to eat, along with the goats, pigs, and piglets. Bicycles, autos and motor bikes passed by on their way to who knows where. I stayed in second gear due to the many ruts and drainage ditches along the way. Crossing the ditches I put my feet up looking like a flying insect but thinking that was better than being splashed with whatever might be in the water where bugs were splashing around.

The puffy white cumulus clouds over head nearly obscured the blue sky as the sea breeze freshened the afternoon heat. Men and boys yelling out, "eh blan" as I slowly rode by smiling and yelling a cordial, "Komo Yea". They smiled in acceptance that this white man was OK.

47 A beach with several games of soccer being played I see the boats still in the distance. I hadn't reached them yet. I turn around traveling back from where I had come to find another right turn....another, and another...they all looked the same with their grey water ditches crossing the road, the children playing, men sitting around talking and yelling welcomes to me. I sure was getting good at "Komo Yea". They laughed and yelled back always... "papi mal". Women with nursing babies, older ladies sitting with baskets of fruits for sail, beautiful, unblemished, smooth black skinned young women with breasts that any man would love to touch, not a droop to be seen in either small or large. A breast mans heaven. Most all of them smiled when spoken to...a few had scowls on their face that showed the deep sadness and depression that must be in many minds in a country where the average annual wage is less than four hundred dollars, U.S., meaning of course that most of those I was passing probably had much less. A naked boy of about two in the middle of the street holds out his hand. A mother holds her baby smiles.

Traveling parallel with the coast I looked to my right down each road I crossed to see if I saw the boats I was trying to find. Motor scooters, "tombos" (the large two wheeled carts made from a vehicle rear end and hauled by a man), bicycles and SUVs pass. One never knows where they are going to turn....no turn signals used; no white lines, no stop lights allow for chaos. Vehicles of all kinds generally

keeping to the right often give way to someone coming straight at you. It makes for interesting driving. I quickly learn that defensive driving is essential in Haiti.

Suddenly, it was like a scene out of a seventeenth century story; a short dead end street of maybe fifty yards was stacked with goods to be taken aboard the boats to the island. There were bags of rice, and cement, baskets of fruits. I only knew I was in the twenty-first century when I saw the cardboard boxes of bottles; detergent, drinks, and items obviously for the guests at the Port Morgan Resort or the Trou Milieu .

Their wet black skin glistening^{ed} in the late afternoon sun as they carried heavy bags, some two or three at a time, each weighing around eighty pounds or more, on their shoulder to the wooden skiff for its short journey to the sailing craft it was to be taken to the island aboard. All the "bateaus" were poled by their skipper around the shallow inlet. The larger sailboats were also poled when their sails were doused. I could not believe the ease in which the skippers were poling their boats upwind, across the wind or down wind. Each pole was some fifteen to twenty feet in length and one thought of a Gondolier in Venice but without the romantic couple.

As I sat on my motor bike I took it all in. Like a dream, a flashback to yesteryear. A large pig tied to a short tether trying for greater ground as he drooled heavily saliva from his mouth atop the rubble thrown along the shore. A wrinkled woman, hard to tell her age, pulls her dress up and tucks it between her legs as she squats next to her basket of fruits to await someone to buy even one fruit. She talks with another vender next to her. Without warning they start yelling at each other. It seems like it is over pricing of their baskets of banana leaf covered baskets of mangos. A young boy, strapping strong but looking forlorn has been standing around for some time watching me; he approaches and asks me for money. An hour later an old man with his cane asks for money. I really feel for the old man and give him a five goude coin. It's one Haitian dollar, fourteen cents US. He smiles with only his few remaining teeth showing white between his blackness. We kid a little about him giving me some money. He walks off to the corner of the wall.

Within the fifty or so yard dirt road there the vendors sit waiting for customers. There are four "bank" booths all the same color of yellow, red, and blue selling their lottery tickets to those dreaming of getting rich quick the same as they do wherever lottery tickets are sold. Tubs of items for sale...toothpaste, Auy soap

bars, TicTac, cigarette lighters, shoe polish, Dakota after shave for men, and so many more small items.

Leaving my scooter and walking to the shore I watch the workers hauling their loads to and from the boats. Long poles from the island are brought ashore one at a time. Some passing me close as they were dragged from the boats. The Isle a Vache is one of the only spots long poles can be found any more around here. The land is deforested from the taking of any wood available for fuel. Reforestation projects are seldom successful because people will cut down the trees years before they gain maturity. Even where guards are posted a pay-off allows one to take what he wants.

The white contents from the sacs are stands out clearly on the shoulders of the black bodies carrying them to the boat. It seems they work without tiring. Curling up a piece of cloth to fit on her head an elderly woman puts a heavy basket on her head without effort and walks off. Skinny dogs scanter through the crowd of workers looking for a dropped morsel. I wonder why so many dogs? Are they pets or food? A soiled blue calico dress hangs from another vender. How often are they washed?

USAID sacs of soy beans poured on ~~an~~ tarp being sold by the # 10 can full and poured into sacs or plastic bags of the customer. Bags of US rice and bags from Agricore United Canada sit waiting to be sold piecemeal, others wait to be loaded on off the boats going to Isle a Vache. I wonder where they got the bags...were these intended as food aid. Why then were they being sold? I have heard that a lot of food aid was diverted to private sale. Was this one of those cases? With the corruption in Haiti it would not surprise me. Forbear, a lawyer friend tells me he won't practice law due to the corruption. He does not think it right that a defendant can negotiate with a judge for his freedom in Haitian dollars.

There are no Haitian dollars as such. All currency is in gouds; five goudes equal one Haitian dollar. A product sold for \$10H would be paid for as 50 gouds.

I am brought back to modern reality when I realize how sad I am that ^{my} digital Nikon camera was stolen from my luggage somewhere between Port o Prince and Aux Ceyes. How can I capture this without my camera? Where can I borrow a digital camera? Perhaps I should be a painter and set up my easel as was done in the past...no cameras then. I want to come back to this spot...again and again. I want every nuance to be embedded in my mind so I don't forget it. I will have to paint

the picture in words. But that won't be adequate enough. There are too many details and I am color blind and won't know the colors. The cacophony of smells is a mixture of sour, sweet, rancid. Some are pleasing others terrible as they mingle with the smoke of rubble burning in scattered piles along the street.

I want to sail aboard one of the boats...take photographs and yet sail the boat myself. How do they handle in the stiff westerlies that seem to prevail? Light in the water freeboard is several feet. What is left when the vessels are fully loaded and ready to cast off? I need to return to see them set their sails loaded to answer the question.

The clash of eras is haunting me. I stand and stare trying to keep out of the way of workers buzzing by me. I am in another world. I love it. I can't understand it. But there I am the only "blan" representing the outside world as I know it and those around me perhaps wanting to know it.

What is it to live like this? I could only imagine. A woman squats in the corner to relieve herself.

Sailing on an off-shore northeast wind of about 8-10 knots a sailing vessel heads into the wind as it approaches and sails next to another boat anchored off-shore. The captain luffs his jib and a minute later his main. Lowering the jib he allows the main to carry him closer to the other boat. The anchor is thrown; the gaff dropped effectively reducing sail allowing the boat to be blown down wind to set the anchor. The crew has furled the sail on the boom while a small boat is poled out to start first bringing the passengers ashore and then the cargo.

(I find the hamburger rolls inconsistent with other items being sold. I have not seen hamburgers in Haiti although I have seen folks grinding meat along side the road.) I am surrounded by wheelbarrows of sugarcane stalks and mangos being sold by the piece. Stripping the cane of it's outer bark when sold allows the buyer to suck the sweet juice from the stick and spit out the pulp. I think of the way it's done in Brasil where they also have small hand presses that they pass the same cane through while the buyer holds his/her cup to retrieve the rich sweetness. I don't see any such presses here, just the cane for sucking on.

Standing at waters edge watching, taking notes, wishing I had a camera a woman, well dressed in skirt and blouse yells orders to nearby workers and scurries off. Is

she one of the well-to-do Haitians that control the flow of goods through the country? I want to ask her but I stay silent. I don't want to interrupt the flow. I don't want to be a part of the story. Yet I am a part of the story...their story. A "blan" is in their midst. I return to the site many times and never see another "blan". What do they think? What is their reaction. I wish I could speak Creol. I think that I want to invite one of my Creol/English speaking friends to come with me to tell me what is being said. I hear the word "blan" from time to time. Are they speaking of my presence? I suspect they are.

A privy sits atop a concrete wall at the shore looking like it's ready to fall into the water. Three young men sit in the shade offered by the small building. They laugh, look at me taking my notes, silent in my presence. I wonder what their thoughts and conversation are.

Looking across the bay to the Isle a Vache I think of the pirate treasure, the sunken "Oxford". I still haven't been able to make contact with Raymond at the dive shop. I look to the west and into the setting sun I see the rusting hull of the "G.H. Vanderborch, Sr and the nameless vessel protruding from the water in the distance. The dock is still, silent, and no one is there. I have come full circle from there to hear and back again.