

# Under the Sea Grape Tree

BY WILL JOHNSON

## Hosting Jackie Kennedy

My diary of March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1978 has only one entry, but one entry of that kind is enough. It reads as follows:

*"Mrs. Jackie Kennedy-Onassis, accompanied by her son John Kennedy, her daughter Caroline Kennedy and nephew Mr. A. Radziwill visited Saba. The Kennedy children stayed overnight at Captain's Quarters Hotel. Mrs. Kennedy went back in the afternoon. I drove her home in The Level and had iced-tea and a chat with Lynne. Mrs. Kennedy is a nice lady and we had a very nice day with her, and the people of Saba were very happy to see her."*

As there was a lot more to the story than just that, let me share the experiences of that day with my readers.

I received a call late in the evening of March 21, 1978, from Mr. Robbert Volgers of Windward Islands Airways asking if I could host an important guest the next day. I was Commissioner but had also been Acting Administrator for nearly a year. As there was no Administrator, I was pretty busy. It was a difficult year for me, but a rewarding one.

I got a lot done for the island and was able to submit many projects for financing which are now monuments on the island. I had also just completed my new home some months before and my family was expanding.

The guest was Jackie O, better known to us on Saba as Mrs. John F. Kennedy, former wife of the late President, one of the few United States Presidents who enjoyed great respect in most countries.

She was accompanied by her children John Kennedy Jr., Caroline Kennedy and her nephew, A. Radziwill. Mr. Volgers came along too, of course, and Police Chief Osmar Ralph Sim-

mons accompanied us for the day.

Old timers say that "Tell-a-Sabie" is faster than using the telephone. I guess Mr. Volgers had made a few other calls besides the one he made to me, as there were loads of cars on the

way to the airport, when I went to pick her up.

When she arrived I could see by the look on her face that she was not expecting a crowd of people to be on hand to welcome her. I therefore tried to spirit her away as quickly as possible. Since I had just moved into

my new home at The Level, I had arranged for her to have tea there and plan the rest of the day.

I remember her admiring the cabinets in the kitchen which were locally made. My wife Lynne recalls that Mrs. Kennedy commented on how blue the Caribbean Sea was and she compared it to the Greek islands of the Mediterranean sea.

The children went diving so we decided to go first to Captain's Quarters Hotel and have lunch there. At the hotel it was pure chaos. The ferry "Martini Bianco" was in port with 150 Venezuelan tourists on board. They all descended on the hotel upon hearing that Mrs. Kennedy was there. They just stood around our table gaping at her and taking pictures. They were shouting out to her how to pose, and wanting to have a photo taken with her. I tried to give her some privacy, but it was impossible. Restaurants were scarce at that time, so we had to stick around and suffer through it. Had I known I could have asked

her to lunch at my place, but my children were small, Teddy was three and Chris only six weeks. When lunch finally was served a local man in his cups rushed our table and, in his enthusiasm to show the crowd that he could kiss Mrs. Kennedy, nearly overturned the table. Now you done know. At that point I suggested to her that I would take her for a drive.

On our way to The Bottom, I decided to take her to a house on St. John's belonging to Lindsay and Claire de Mambey. From their swimming pool there is a spectacular view of The Bottom. The late Eugenius Johnson was tailgating me. I had to make a sharp turn on the road leading up to Crispeen. My indicator lights were not working. Eugenius, God rest and bless him, is lovingly remembered for his many skills and contributions. Driving was not one of them. Eugenius' philosophy about bumpers and fenders was that they were only attached to the car to protect the engine. In his way of thinking it was only natural to use bumpers and fenders as much as possible on the

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walls of Saba to protect the engine. The consequence of this was that I crashed the Administrator's car into the wall. It shook up Mrs. Kennedy, but I reversed the car out of the wall and continued on up the hill. In the meantime Eugenius continued on to The Bottom unaware of what had happened.

**The Administrator's car** was not in the best of conditions anyway. It was an old white Toyota Corolla and had seen better days. When we arrived at the house, I assured Mrs. Kennedy that there was no need to worry. I tried to let her remain there for awhile, so that she could enjoy the great view and the privacy as well.

In the meantime we were running out of time. We had to get back and check on the young folks. They had returned from diving and had decided to go up the mountain. I took her up the mountain road as far as she could go and for her to have some privacy. We sat there talking while waiting for the children to come down the mountain. I think she enjoyed that part of the day. I had instructed Major Simmons to ask people to stay at Banana Gut and not to come up the steps so that she could have some time to herself.

Time dragged on and I could see that she was concerned. I assured her that the children would be fine and that they were accompanied by the dive masters and a policeman. She, however, was concerned about getting back to St. Maarten as she was staying at La Samanna Hotel and had an important dinner date there. She asked me if I would take care of them and send them over the next morning. I told her she could trust me with that one.

**Everywhere we went** crowds of people were there to see her off. I apologized to her and told her that since the island only had 1200 people, they had all seen her. I also told her that people loved her husband. By that time, having been in an accident together we had become familiar to each other. I detected a hint of mischief in her eyes when

she smiled and said to me;" You mean Mr. Onassis? I wanted to say, "Of course." But as a good host I acted embarrassed and said, "No Madam, I meant President Kennedy." At the airport there were crowds of people there to see her off. She got the same reaction from our people as Her Majesty the Queen gets when visiting the island.

**After saying goodbye,** and as she was about to enter the plane, she came back to me and put some money in my pocket and said; "I hope that will be enough to take care of the hotel."

Later when I checked my pocket after the plane had taken off I felt like the customs officer in Paris. He had once paid a ten dollar fine for Mr. Aristotle Onassis who did not carry cash money with him and needed to pay for something or the other. The customs officer told the press that he wanted to tell his grandchildren that he had paid a bill for Mr. Onassis.

**Well, now that** I have grandchildren of my own, I can safely tell them that the sixty dollars in my pocket could not go far. Lucky that I had complete charge of the government back then. My salary was only NAf. 600 per month, and then as still now, the Windward Islands Bank had my house mortgaged, I could not afford to take on any extra bills for the rich and famous.

Mr. David Harden was the operator of Captain's Quarters at the time. He claimed, by the way, to be 63<sup>rd</sup> cousin to Queen Elizabeth II, twice removed. Despite those impressive credentials, he too was in a financial bind. So he and I decided that the Government of Saba, perennially cash strapped, would host the Kennedy children, for the difference. I asked the police to keep an eye on the hotel that night and got them off safely the next morning.

**I remember having** had a very interesting conversation

with Mrs. Kennedy's nephew. He was quite mature in his thinking and asked intelligent questions about the island and its history. People claimed that John Kennedy Jr. had returned to Saba some years later to dive. I have no proof of that and Glen Holm of the Tourist Bureau also is not certain if as people claim that he did return.

When John Kennedy Jr. was lost in the plane accident in 1999, to be honest I was very upset. I had been responsible for him and his sister. I had great hopes for

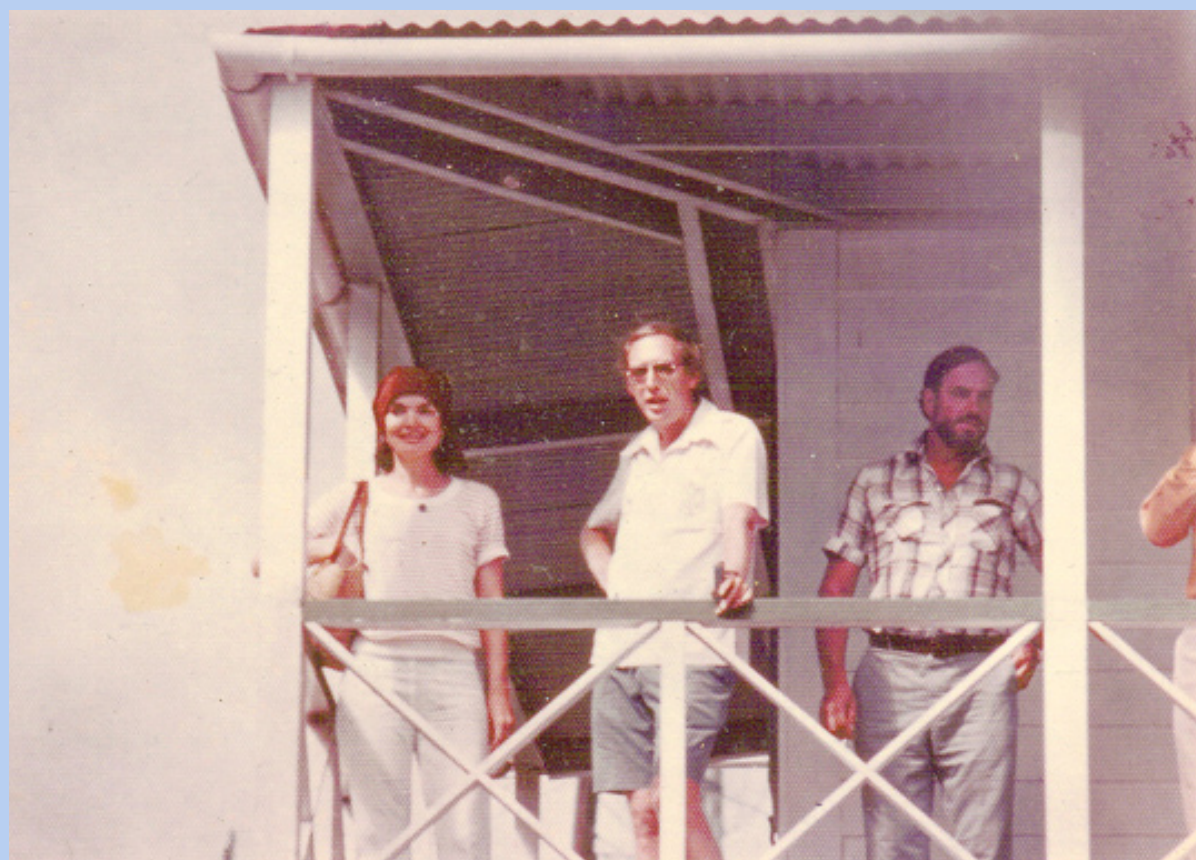
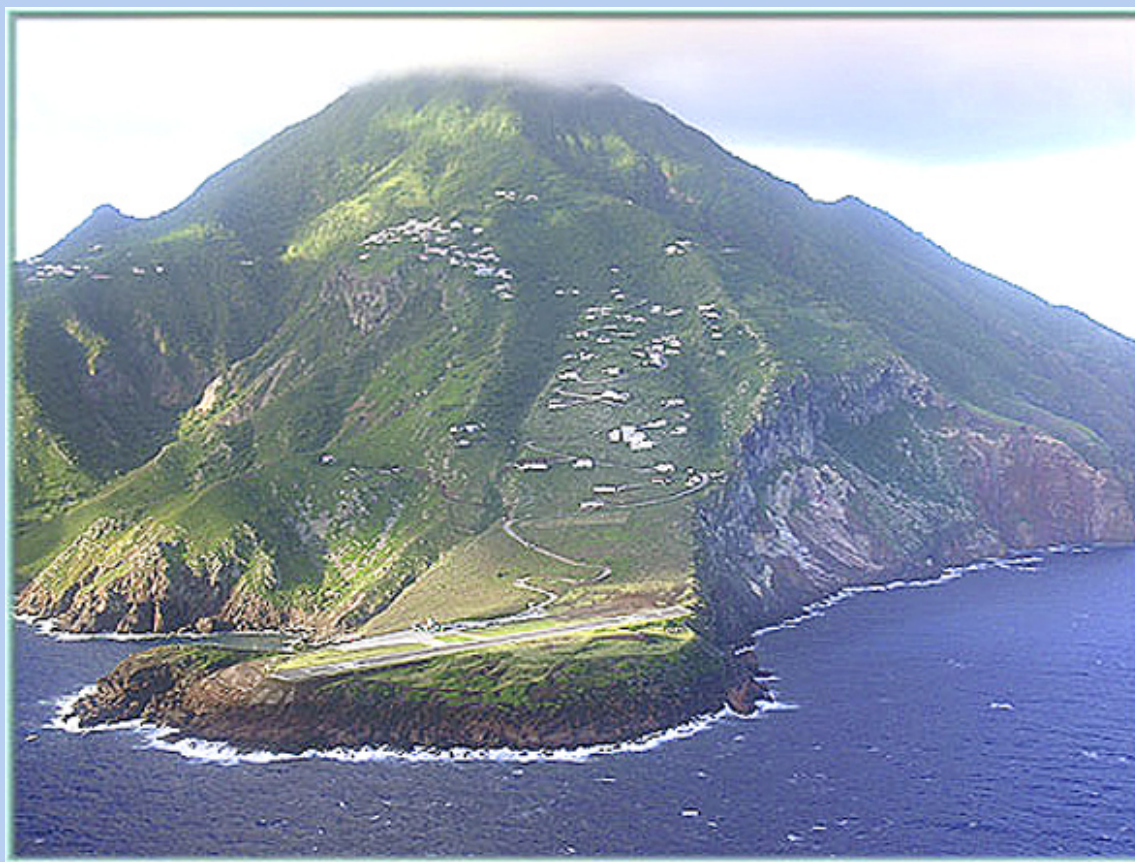
him when he started his career. Regrettably he was all too young when he died.

**I only have a photo** of that day in which you can only see my elbow. There were so many taken that day, but I was too busy taking care of the lady. Considering everything surrounding the Kennedy family, I thought my readers would be interested to hear about my day with Jackie Kennedy. And boy, I am relieved that I have been able to unload the story of the accident on my readers. All these years I have been embarrassed to

have been the cause of that accident. Now that it is out in the open I feel relieved. I balanced out the accident in my mind though, with the good discussions I had with the lady on the step road leading up the mountain.

**When I was a boy** on St. Maarten there was a lady on Backstreet who used to sell peanuts. She advertised them as useful to "crack and converse" and that became her nickname. We did not have any peanuts, but Jackie and I "cracked and conversed" to our hearts' content. So much so that she could tease me on the way to the airport about the accident and that, perhaps, I had meant to tell her that Saba people admired Onassis. At that time I had not yet read "Het Tekon van Jonah" by Boeli van Leeuwen who did not have any flattering comments about her marriage to Onassis. I would have never drawn that to her attention, though.

And so life on a small island does have its benefits at times when a simple island boy like myself can "crack and converse" with the rich and famous and have fond memories of it as well.



**Mrs. Jackie Kennedy-Onassis with Mr. David Harden, Mr. Robbert Volgers, and the right elbow of Will Johnson - Administrator. (Taken March 22nd, 1978)**