

ROUNDING THE SEINE

Guy H. Benjamin

Guy H. Benjamin remembers growing up in East End in St. John in his Me and My Beloved Virgin St. John, U.S.A. Mr. Benjamin has had a long career as an educator. He began teaching immediately after graduating as the first St. Johnian from Charlotte Amalie High School in St. Thomas. He is now retired and lives in New York City in the winter and in St. John in the summer.

Every time I remember our boyhood days in East End, I still feel correct in saying that no other children had as much fun, joy, and happiness as we had.

Our community had just eleven families. My godfather owned a seine and a large boat to hold it. He would keep the boat ready, and whenever a school of fries (minnows) came into the bay, we would be looking out for the sweet carang [the cavally, a member of the jack family], the beautiful yellow tail snapper, and the fat blue runner (our native name, "hard nose"). They generally came one or two days after the fries.

If they were sweet head fries, they never had a chance to last too long near the shore. The men threw their nets over them and would have to ease them to the shore, so many would they cover at one time. Then they emptied the fries in their boxes. Everybody in the village would come to get a share. I could hardly wait to get home with them. My aunts would jump on the fries, take off the heads, and wash them. Meanwhile my grandmother gave me the mortar, with the black pepper, onions, and salt. This I had to pound until it was fine and mixed. Then my aunt would season the fries while the flour batter was being prepared. Many people then made roussayed (fried the fish with lard, butter, or salad oil). The fries were then placed in the batter and cooked. Ambrosia! The whole operation took 30 minutes combined, from sea to stomach. Nothing can be finer than to be eating batter from the sweet head fries. This year, Goldie (Mrs. Golda Samuel) gave me some at Thanksgiving. Is it any wonder that I overate again?

In the meantime, the men were on the lookout for the fish. You heard the signal — Round Off! Everybody left the houses and headed for the beach, every little boy and girl, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins by the dozens.

All of us small boys were out in the water. We must keep the fish from coming to the ropes so we "beat water."

The men were out at the back, holding back the cork

that's attached to the seine. The women pulled the ropes to get the seine in as fast as possible before the fish got a chance to realize that they were a captive supper, lunch, or breakfast. And all of us naked boys got nearer to land, so that we soon would be pulling the seine.

We had the two arms in the surf. We had to let the fries out so we could see what we'd caught. A beauteous sight! The fish were going around in perfect circles, glistening silver and spotted gold. We had caught carang and yellow tails. There is no prettier sight any place than these beautiful dinners swimming around. I wondered if they knew their fate? Then my only thought was to help to get them on shore, which we did.

Now it was sharing time. First, they were all divided in two — one share for the owner, the other for the rest of us. No one was omitted, not even the landowner. Every child, woman, and man was given a share. When we caught the blue-eyed bonito, if each one could not get a whole one, then we sliced it in junks [chunks] and we all shared. If that were communal living, then we were the first Danish-American communists in the Virgin Islands.

This was the happy, glorious life we lived in East End, with our sea which provided us with natural health and life.

If my grandmother wanted a lobster for Sunday morning breakfast, she would say, "Guy, bring home a lobster with you tonight." I would go to my favorite rock and take out a lobster and bring it home. My aunts would cook it in a kerosene tin on the fire. I would eat the legs while it was cooking — so succulent and sweet.

We had lobsters like this, even after I returned to St. John to teach. Then Milton would say, "Benjy, cook the raisin fungus [cornmeal dish] and I'm going for the lobsters."

In an hour, he'd be back with at least four. It would be a whole gang of hungry men and boys. But we'd have enough and some to spare.

Progress has taken away our lobsters. Today, we are paying \$20.00 for a three-pound lobster, and we must go far out in the ocean bed to dive for them.