

Lest I Forget

BY MABEL WAGNER



*The Wagner Family
Pioneers of Trellis Bay, Beef Island, BVI*

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Dedication

*This book is dedicated to
my daughter, Suzanna Joan
and
my son, Michael Andrew
and in loving memory of my late husband,
Captain Wladek Wagner
I would like to extend my warmest thanks
and appreciation to all who encouraged me
to put this story together
and
my very special thank you to my daughter, Suzanna
and to my niece, Rosemary
who, midst many other demands,
persevered in reading and producing on the computer
the final draft of my manuscript.*

Foreword

*Every life has a story,
And every story, long or short, elapses over a period of time –
an hour, a day, a year, or many years.
In that passage of time, countless changes take place.
Sometimes we can't even relate to time.
Sometimes, what happened months or years ago
seems almost like last week, or maybe even yesterday.
It has happened to me as I have dug deep into the past,
and into my heart, to write this story.
I have no intention of trying to cover
all my eighty-seven years.
I will spare you that by selecting only the saga of Trellis Bay,
the Trellis Bay of Beef Island,
one of the thirty-two small islands of the
British Virgin Islands,
that finally found its place
in the sun, and on the map, over the passage of time.*

Introduction

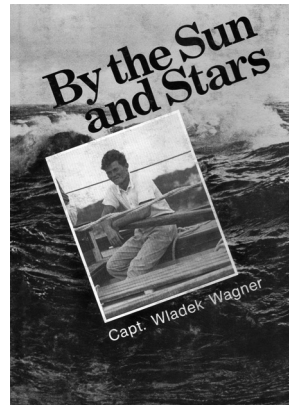
SUDDENLY, in the middle of the night, I realized my story needed an introduction. Who, I asked myself, would know that the man at my side, Captain Wagner, was the Polish sailor of circumnavigation fame? His voyage around the world, beginning July 8th, 1932, and his dedicated mission of seven years and three boats.... Zjawa, Zjawa II and Zjawa III ... came to an abrupt end with the outbreak of WWII on September 1st, 1939. Ordered by the Polish consul in London to abandon his return to Poland he was detained in England a Stateless person and his treasured Zjawa III commandeered for the duration of the war by the British Admiralty. There followed solemn years in England. Later, his story was chronicled in his book, "By the Sun and Stars," published in 1986.

I, on the other hand, cannot relate to any such interesting background. When we met, late in 1944, I was 19 years old and busy with my own pursuits in music and teaching while at the same time anticipat-

ing the next national "call up." My father and Wladek had met at the local harbor in Buckie, Scotland, and consequently Wladek was invited to our home. In 1945 the war ended and there were more visits to our home when Wladek was in the area, and as time went by I found him more and more interesting.

By August of 1948, we decided to begin our life together and seek a new horizon much to the concern of my parents. This took us across the ocean into the unknown and into what could very well be called, the next "chapter" of "By the Sun and Stars." It became a very interesting chapter and, although we had often spoken about writing "His" and "Hers" versions, it was not done. In later years, after a massive stroke, cancer and Wladek's passing in 1992, I felt our journey would be left incomplete and I was obligated to complete it.

So, it is now that I invite you, the reader, to travel along with me through those hard but extraordinary days, relived for you in "Lest I Forget."





Our home afloat was the 77ft. ketch, Rubicon, built in 1898, seen here near St. Thomas in 1949.

Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, USVI

IT WAS EARLY in the morning of May 5th, 1949, when we neared the entrance to the harbor of Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. What a beautiful sight it was! The hills in the background and along the open waterfront showed white buildings with bright red roofs. Glistening in the early morning sunlight they resembled a giant Christmas tree with its lights on. Wladek's smile encouraged me and I smiled, too. We both liked what we saw.

This would be a pleasant resting place until we could decide what the next step would be. We had sailed from England in early August, 1948, with a group of people but most had, after the Atlantic crossing, gone their separate ways on reaching Port of Spain Trinidad. Our own decision to sail on was prompted by the surprise news of my pregnancy and a need to find a place to stay for the remaining seven months of 'waiting'.

So here we were in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Our home afloat was the 77ft. ketch, Rubicon, built in 1898. Laid up and neglected for many years, Wladek had purchased her economically after WWII

and restored her with a view of possibly moving to Australia. Aboard now, were Wladek Wagner, our captain, Mabel Wagner, captain's wife, our friend Rev. Arthur Diccon (Dick) Brook, Wladek's brother, Marian (Manek) and his friend Marian (Bambo).



*Wladek and Mabel arrive in
St. Thomas, USVI, May 5, 1949.*

It was a happy group that now sailed into St. Thomas harbor and dropped anchor clear of the local sloops and schooners waiting to unload their cargoes. The waterfront, upon closer inspection was not inviting. Dirty, muddy water lapped the edge of the shoreline and I did not relish the thought of having to row over there.

Beyond the immediate shoreline, there were massive stone buildings, open warehouses with heavy iron doors that were obviously related to the island's past history. There was much to absorb. We had a great view from our position in the harbor, and were anxious to complete the formalities of

port entry and go ashore.

Before long a small launch came alongside bringing the Port Doctor. He duly gave us a bill of health and instructed us to make

a formal entry on shore at the Customs and Immigration Offices.

We all tramped ashore and headed for the offices located on the corner of the main street across from the imposing Fort Christian-sen. We fulfilled the requirements, were duly finger printed and registered under the Aliens Registration Act of 1940.

We now had 'legal' status in the US Virgin Islands but there were restrictions. Large red letters printed on our permits reminded us we could not obtain work ashore. We were required to leave St. Thomas every 29 days and enter a foreign port in order to re-enter St. Thomas for another 29-day extension. The nearest foreign port was Road Town, Tortola, to the east of St. Thomas, in the group distinctively called the British Virgin Islands.

The thought of having to go to sea again periodically did not appeal to me. I was so tired and so sick I was just glad we had a haven for the time being and a welcome mat for the next 29 days. The anchorage in the main harbor was not conducive to a prolonged stay so we moved to a quieter more sheltered area further down the bay.

The setting there was charming, and the view from Rubicon totally delightful. It was a pretty, quiet and very peaceful place and I loved it. Facing us on shore we delighted in the sight of a warehouse type building that had been converted to an attractive residence sitting on a nice grassy area landscaped with young palm trees and shrubs. Rubicon seemed happy, too, as she swung gently at anchor.

Two small sailboats were anchored not too far from us. We couldn't tell if this part of the bay was a private area or the beginning of a boatyard. Not knowing whether to go ashore or not we waited until there was some sign of life on the property. It was not long before we were hailed from shore. We lowered the dinghy and rowed across to be met by Lt. Cdr. Tony Work. He and Mrs. Work were retirees and the home we had been admiring on this quiet waterfront turned out to be theirs and we knew our stay would be pleasant.

Later, the skipper of one of the two neighboring yachts visited us. His name was Per (Peter) Dohm. Originally from Denmark, Peter was earning a living by looking after the sailing yacht Hope, owned by William Irwin.

Peter's plan was to earn enough money so he could establish

himself in St. Thomas, then have his wife and three children join him from Denmark. Peter became a regular most welcome visitor. He got along well with Manek and Bambo and this made for good times for all.

Wladek and I were comfortable in our new surroundings but we remained cautious about our financial situation. We needed to find a source of income. Apart from any personal needs we might dare to have, Rubicon always needed something and always had to come first. She was our lifeline.

BEING THE ONLY large yacht in St. Thomas at the time, Rubicon was attracting considerable attention. Townspeople and tourists alike were eager to come aboard to see the big white boat. It wasn't long before we were rowing back and forth transporting people to and from Rubicon. In 1949, only a trickle of Americans was visiting St. Thomas. Tourism was in its early stages.

The town was flanked on the waterside by the large stone warehouses we had observed from our first anchorage. These warehouses fronted Main Street and had been converted into colorful shops and businesses. The old buildings in the alleys, off Main Street, were also converted this way.

The very attractive stores and boutiques were filled with all manner of goods from around the world. It was great fun to window shop and admire the merchandise. We didn't have the money to buy anything but were content with looking and wishing. The town was as fascinating to us as Rubicon was to the townspeople and tourists.

St. Thomas was our first taste of America, and it was good. However, there were some differences to deal with – nothing vital, only surprising. For instance, putting ice in my freshly brewed cup of tea, or being sent to the hardware section of the store to purchase a girdle, which turned out to be a griddle. Then being sent back to the lingerie section to buy a girdle, which turned out to be a foundation garment. Then trying to purchase a stone of potatoes (the equivalent of 14 pounds) and, amidst much consternation, told they were only available in 5 or 10 pound bags. Moreover, trying to purchase a bag of flour, I was asked, "Do you have someone to carry it "How

would I manage it?" I simply answered; I would carry it myself.

More consternation! So I asked to see the bag – it was 50 or 80 pounds! I should have asked for a sack. "Hi" no longer meant a measure of height, but rather a greeting. Ah, well.

From tourists we learned that boredom set in once they'd done all the shopping, dining, sleeping and beaching they could do. They expressed a desire to visit neighboring islands but had no way of getting back and forth. Boat chartering did not exist then. This was the obvious opportunity for us! We could offer the charter service and earn much-needed dollars within the limits of our Alien permit. This was not considered working on shore so it could be done.

Energized and excited by this possibility we first checked with the local authorities for approval. To our delight, they seemed genuinely happy for us, so we were on our way. We did not expect our efforts to be very lucrative but we would be able to survive this unexpected stopover and at the same time be making a contribution to the local tourist activities. We felt blessed.

To begin our chartering venture, we offered day trips to nearby islands. Our new friends, Don Dannenberg, Carol Cummings, Helen Gorrell, Joyce Marston and Frank Donnell, were always willing to come aboard and help crew.

Now that we had additional funds, I wanted to find a doctor. The island's favorite was Dr. Roy Anduze, and an appointment was made. At first glance, Dr. Anduze guessed I was having a dif-

ficult time. He thought I appeared fragile and needed to be "built up" as he put it. I was promptly given a series of vitamin shots and daily doses of this and that. I knew he was going to take good care of me. I felt very fortunate and very relieved.

DAY CHARTERING was a success and was followed by longer trips to such islands as Saba, a Dutch island lying East of the Anegada Passage, also all the Caribbean Islands as far as Trinidad. The charter to Saba was actually the first extended charter and was

particularly interesting to our guests. This volcanic island, an enormous cone-shaped mountainous rock rising straight up out of the depths of the Caribbean Sea was rarely visited and even then only haphazardly by island schooners.

There was no safe harbor or safe anchorage and the settle-

ment called Bottom, lay at the top of the mountain sandwiched in a volcanic cavity between two peaks. It was considered an adventure to go there, and we sailed on the 27th May, 1949, returning on 31st May.

This was the first of many foreign port trips to come. Chartering to several of the surrounding islands soon became a fairly regular schedule. Sometimes, I had to go along, and sometimes I didn't, provided I could stay ashore. The Immigration Authorities were very considerate. It appeared they trusted us to abide by the regulations and not overstay our welcome.

