

New book chronicles VG history

• *'Intimate Portrait' includes photos, interviews*

BY LUIS ANDRES HENAO

Louis Walters remembers how he got his "very first pen." His mother gave him a hen that laid 10 eggs. He traveled from Virgin Gorda to St. Thomas and sold them for 50 cents. But he was still 17 cents short for that nice fountain pen he needed to teach a class. "So I had to beg for extra money to buy my pen. It was hard life."

Mr. Walters' account is part of a series of profiles featured in Virgin Gorda: An Intimate Portrait by photographer Joan Soncini.

The book, published this month, captures the essence of the island through dozens of interviews and photographs with schoolchildren, political figures, farmers, fishermen, and cooks.

"My goal was to get a cross section of all roles of life," Ms. Soncini said in a recent interview after she came off the ferryboat from Virgin Gorda. "Visually, it was so beautiful. It's the people that does it."

There's Father J.N.K. Gibson, the former rector of the then- Anglican churches, who remembers that the first day he



Joan Soncini's Virgin Gorda: An Intimate Portrait was released this month throughout the territory. The book shows the island's history through dozens of photographs and interviews of its residents which capture the essence of the sister island. (Photo: Luis Andres Henao)

held mass, only one person showed up. "When I arrived in 1956 there were only 356 people living in The Valley," Fr. Gibson recalls in the book. "That's until Little Dix started."

'Difficult' changes

The resort constructed by Laurence Rockefeller began the transformation from a rural economy to a world known tourist destination.

"It was a very difficult time for the people, who had been accustomed to 'real' life for generations, to adjust now to vehicles and heavy equipment," says Premier Ralph O'Neal, who wrote the prologue to the book. But according to Mr. O'Neal, the transition was possible because the developer was always mindful of Virgin Gordians. "Vehicles couldn't travel faster than 15 miles an hour, because you had old people in the village and farmers walking their cattle. ... They did a wonderful job of working with the people."

The more than 30 interviews conducted by Ms. Soncini, were transcribed and edited in the United States and printed as first-person accounts. "I far prefer listening than talking," Ms. Soncini, a psychotherapist and an adjunct professor at New York University, says. She adds that the most

rewarding part about collecting the memories was being "trusted" and "welcomed" into the homes of Virgin Gordians.

"People today don't understand it was a real struggle for the elder leaders of Virgin Gorda. So the younger ones will read it and learn and the older folks will read it and remember."

Carpenter and politician

Waldo O'Neal, the 89-year old brother of the premier, and a carpenter and politician who worked on the original construction of the Little Dix Bay Resort, was one of them. Months after she interviewed him, Ms. Soncini came back with her husband Mario and gave him a copy of the book. "I wasn't sure if he remembered us, but he took the book and hugged it," she said. The couple walked to other houses to deliver the books. On the way back they passed by Mr. O'Neal's home. This time "he wasn't lying down; he was sitting up reading the book," Ms. Soncini said.

Virgin Gorda: An Intimate Portrait is available at major stores, supermarkets and hotels in Virgin Gorda and at book and stationary stores on Tortola.

A book launch party will be held at the Chez Bamboo restaurant in Virgin Gorda on Nov 17.

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