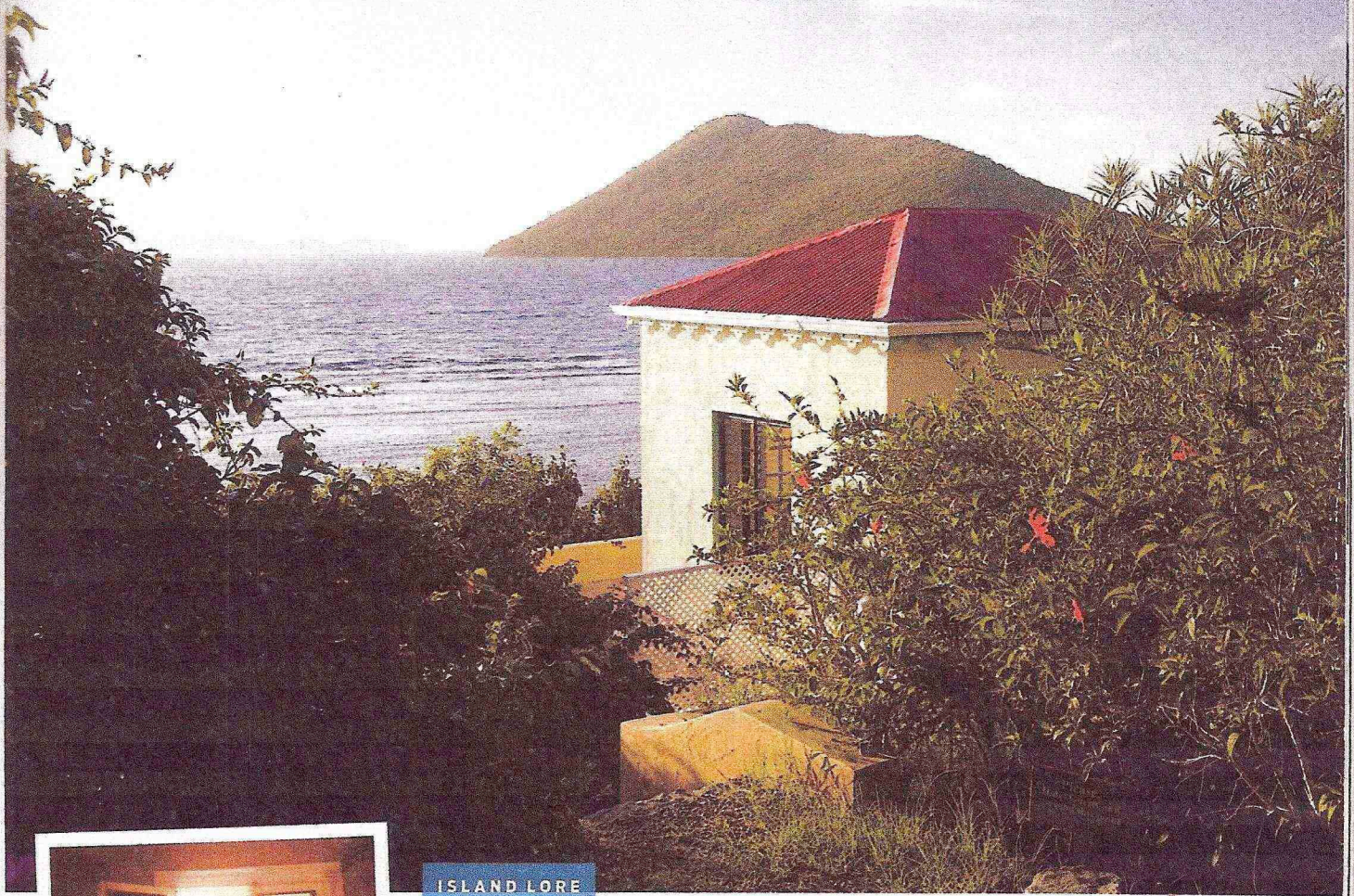


CARIBBEAN LIFE

Beef Island rises in the distance from the top of eight-acre Marina Cay. Below: Young marrieds Robb and Rodie White made a home on Marina Cay in 1937.



ISLAND LORE

LOVE SHACK

In 1937, as a depression lingered and war loomed, they bought a deserted isle and built their dream house on it, one brick at a time.

BY MARK SCHROPE

THE U.S. ECONOMY SITS IN RUINS, the world has become an increasingly unstable place, and a pair of newlyweds searches for an escape from the madness. It could be 2010, but this tale starts in 1937. Amid a crippling depression at home and rumblings of war abroad, fledgling writer Robb White and his fiancée, Rosalie “Rodie” Mason, resolve to make a fresh start. So, married only

four months, they pack up and, with former U.S. Navy officer Robb at the helm, set sail for the Caribbean. They search in earnest for a fitting home and, after several disappointing weeks, happen upon a tiny uninhabited islet in the British Virgin Islands, Marina Cay. Smitten, they buy the rocky eight-acre parcel just off the east end of Tortola for next to nothing — just \$60, equivalent to less »

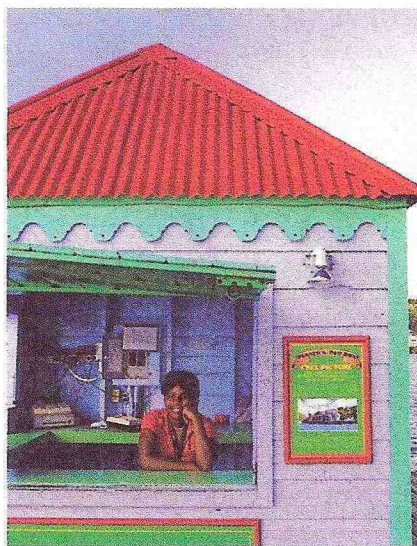
CARIBBEAN LIFE

than \$1,000 today — and proceed to dig a cistern and build a small house on its highest point.

I first heard Robb White's name in 1980, when my fourth-grade teacher read aloud his classic 1946 children's book, *The Lion's Paw*, about three young runaways who sail the inland waterways of central Florida. Twenty-five years after my first reading, I got my hands on a copy of the book, which was by then long out of print. The night I started to read it to my own kids, I found in the front a biographical blurb that mentioned Robb and Rodie's incredible years on Marina Cay. Selfishly, I put story time on hold and ran to the computer to find out more. I discovered a faded photograph of Robb and Rodie — he was 28 and she was 24 — in their little island house, each raising a drink to the camera. I vowed then and there to make my way to Marina Cay to follow in their footsteps, if not quite walk a mile in their shoes.

DESPITE THE ROMANCE OF LIVING as willful castaways, the Whites' time in paradise wasn't entirely idyllic; they faced one challenge after another on Marina Cay, and after just three short years, an unlucky turn of events

brought their escapist fantasy to an untimely end. During Robb's long writing career, he recounted the Marina Cay experience three times, in the memoirs *In Privateer's Bay* (1939), *Our Virgin Island* (published in 1953 and made into a hokey movie, *Virgin Island*, in 1958) and *Two on the Isle* (1985). Today, beyond the legion of adults who, like me, fondly recall reading (or hearing) *The Lion's Paw* as kids, his body of work — mostly adventure novels for young readers, TV scripts for shows like *Perry Mason* and screenplays for a



few B-grade horror flicks — is mostly forgotten. And 70-odd years later, so is the Whites' island romance.

On Marina Cay, however, the legend of Robb and Rodie is alive and well. The island's new owner, BVI-based Pusser's Rum company, lures passing yachties with a breezy restaurant and runs a small rustic resort where guests can climb the hill to the house the Whites built and pick up where these famous lovebirds left off, minus the hardships.

I FINALLY STEPPED ONTO MARINA Cay last October, just before the sun went down. I made my way through a lush stand of hibiscuses, bougainvilleas and banyan trees, wasted no time ditching my bags in a red-roofed villa and took the short hike to the top of the island. There I found the Whites' stout, 600-square-foot home still standing after seven decades and now open to visitors. It's a testament to Robb and Rodie's grit — and still a spectacular perch from which to watch the sun set.

To be sure, the British Virgin Islands today are very different than they were in the 1930s, and Marina Cay is now reached by a complimentary ferry from Trellis Bay on Beef Island. But the view from my villa, which houses two of the

VISITORS TO MARINA CAY TODAY ARE QUITE HAPPY TO SKIP STRAIGHT TO THE RELAXATION PHASE OF THE CASTAWAY EXPERIENCE.



eight guest beds on Marina Cay, was one Robb White could appreciate. Sitting back on the porch, I saw no signs of human habitation in view across the Drake Channel to Round Rock, Ginger Island and Beef Island.

Below me was the long reef head where Robb and Rodie ventured some nights to pick off lobsters and the occasional ornery octopus without even getting their hair wet. The crustaceans are scarce these days, but kicking out to the reef, I found great snorkeling and plenty of the snapper, trunkfish, parrotfish and jack that the Whites often depended on for sustenance.

By kayak, the 320-yard trip from Great Camanoe Island to Marina Cay is



The cottages at Pusser's Marina Cay Resort overlook Sir Francis Drake Channel. Opposite, from above: Marina Cay welcomes visiting yachts; Pusser's Robb White Bar extends from the Whites' original house.

easy, but for the Whites it was often an arduous journey in their 13-foot boat, *Jalopy*, piled to the gunwales with gravel and other building materials. They had then to unload the supplies and carry everything up the hill — I got a little winded just lugging my bags to the villa.

The Whites doubtless enjoyed the island at a deeper level because they had invested so much of themselves in the place. All the same, visitors today are quite happy to skip straight to the relaxation phase of the castaway experience. A large open-air restaurant and bar decorated with historic photos of the Whites sits just back from the island's main beach. Visiting boaters and resort guests can enjoy local seafood creations and the expected array of rum-based concoctions, including the celebrated Pusser's Painkiller. During the high season, decks around the old White

house come to life for happy-hour performances by Michigan-born sailing troubadour Michael "Beans" Gardner.

Of course, the Whites' island dream didn't last. The couple followed the deteriorating situation in Europe on BBC Radio, and as the conflict escalated, Robb was duty-bound to resume his naval career. About the same time, the British government — displeased over some of Robb's unflattering portrayals of conditions in the BVI — informed the couple that their license for land ownership had been rejected, and in 1940 they left the island. A couple of decades later, they divorced; Rodie stayed in her childhood home in Georgia, and Robb headed to California. Marina Cay changed ownership several times before Pusser's signed a long-term lease with the government and created its resort.

Robb, who died in 1990 at the age of

81, couldn't forgive the British Crown for taking away his island, and never returned to Marina Cay. He wrote in his epilogue to *Two on the Isle* that, from what he had heard, the island remained "separate from a lot of the world." He seemed pleased to know the house still stood and that the small resort attracted guests who weren't looking for "any of the typical tropical plastic entertainments." That certainly holds true today. You don't go to Marina Cay to be seen or pampered. You go for the same reason the Whites did — because there's something magical about living on a private island, for a few years or a few days. *

The *Lion's Paw* was reissued in 2008 by Robb White's third wife and widow, Annie White, under the A.W. Ink imprint; *Two on the Isle* is being prepared for reissue. 801-694-0533; thelionspaw.org