

Kelcie Troutman: Alright, Mr. Schuster, what is your earliest memory of Great Pond?

Robert Schuster: Well, my earliest memory goes back to when I was five or six years old when my father would take me down to Great Pond. In those days, they just call it (greening?) the fish, which [inaudible] really harpooning. You used to make a spear out of marang branches. So, you end up with a triple-pointed spear—which I tried to catch fish, but at five or six years old, how much did you know? And then my next best time was when we went to harvest rock salt. Because I knew what the outcome of that was—I was going to get ice cream. So that was always an adventure that was very meaningful to me in knowing what the outcome was going to be.

KT: And can you describe the state of Great Pond at that time?

RS: Great Pond was majestic. The road to east end was a dirt road. And the lagoon came right about between a foot or eighteen inches from the edge of the road. And you could look across entire plane and across the lagoon because there were maybe three to five—I guess there were black mangroves scattered just against the road. But everything else was just water.

KT: What stories were you told about Great Pond by your elders?

RS: Oh, how many years when my father was a kid—he learned from his father. Basically, a lot of information was passed on. And I'm sure I didn't get all from my father. And I can already tell you about what I've gotten. But [inaudible] stories. The lagoon basically was the breadbasket of St. Croix. I mean it provided fish, crabs, shrimp, lobster, salt—both coarse rock and fine. And a lot of fish because you had mullet, you had silvers, you had—there used to be barracudas. A lot of gar. A lot of gar—they'd usually be by the moat. And there'd be little ones, and they'd be swimming there against the current. Some snook.

KT: What was your favorite fish personally to eat from Great Pond?

RS: Barracuda. They were small. They weren't twenty-five pounders.

KT: What are some of the most important uses by the community of Great Pond over time?

RS: Well, other than feeding the people, I haven't seen any use made of it. I've seen it basically in disuse, like many things that the government has custody over. I mean, they let Great Pond go just like they let a whole bunch of buildings in Christiansted go.

KT: When you think of Great Pond as it is now, what do you picture? What is its ecological state?

RS: A disaster. It needs—I don't know how many metric tons of silt are in there. The whole east part of the lagoon needs to be dredged out significantly. Now, where you're going to put that silt, that's the question.

KT: What ecological state or community uses do you want to see either improved or restored or added to Great Pond?

RS: I don't think it needs anything. I think it needs to be restored to as close to its original state as possible. But adding anything would—no, I can't see that.

KT: Can you describe a little bit more what you saw its original state to be?

RS: Well, you'd need to see the picture. [laughter] I knew it when it was full and vibrant. I knew it every year when it was dry. Because we used to race our horses across the flat. I mean, it was almost level. I've seen airplanes land in there.

KT: What are some of the things that you think have contributed to the change or degradation of Great Pond or this island?

RS: Construction. Poor planning and how roads were designed. The roads that were built ended up being canals or channels to bring silt into the lagoon instead of having them divert or something or into swales—and disperse the direction of the water site. It can disperse the sediments through grassland; would have helped tremendously. That can still, I think, be engineered.

KT: What are some things you think can be done to slow down or stop the degradation of Green Pond?

RS: Finding some way to divert the flow of water which brings the sediment, causes erosion—that needs to be engineered. So, some kind of swales are going to have to be—they can't be developed in the neighborhood, but they can be designed and incorporated into the roadways, diverting the water in a different direction and then creating riprap or something that will help slow the water down and let the sediment fall out.

KT: What do you remember about the impacts of major hurricanes like Hugo or Marilyn to the Great Pond area?

RS: Well, there was no impact because whatever vegetation there was there was basically intact. What got destroyed were the manchineel trees that were along the baymouth bar. And I mean there was there was a forest of manchineel trees—where the boy scout camp is today. The whole bay side was basically under manchineel trees—there must have been forty manchineel trees in that section. And those along the baymouth bar, those got knocked out. I don't know if any of those are growing back. I guess the sea hibiscus and [inaudible] and stuff like that, along that—but you could always walk it. The moat was what got damaged the most because there were a couple of mangrove trees on the west side that got—not major because it was an inlet that you could wade. You'd go down, not above your knees and cross it. And the water was always nice and cool. And you could see the fish coming and going, you could see lobster, you could see crab. At night, you put a flashlight there and you see shrimp—you can still catch a lot of shrimp along south shore. The other thing about Great Pond was that where the [inaudible] came into the lagoon, and fresh water was flowing, a fine moss grew there. And the fishermen would come and harvest that moss to put in the fish spots to get certain type of fish.

KT: What is a story about Great Pond that you hope to see endure over time and change?

RS: Well, I don't want to see it change, but I have no choice. The story to tell is how it fed this community for centuries. Which it's not doing now. It's just a mudhole and I mean, it's a loss hatchery. I remember my grandfather, he would put a fish drop in the moat and catch fish. He'd take what he needed, and he released the rest. So, people don't do that anymore. You take everything.

KT: Who else do you think we should contact to talk to about the history of Great Pond?

RS: Oh, yeah, you need to speak to Mr. (Julio Encarnacion?). He's in his eighties. You need to speak to (Clinton Lang?)—he's in his eighties—and his wife, (Ms. Cantan?). They grew up right there and in Sallys Fancy. Those are the only elders that I know that would have intimate knowledge of Great Pond.

KT: Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience with Great Pond or share your thoughts about this ongoing (plan for restoration?)

RS: I wish much success. And I know it's an uphill fight. You're going to have—I guess people against what you're planning, even though they don't know the history of it. But I'm sure the majority of people that know its true history would like to see it restored to its pristine state. To give us a sight to see. It really was.

KT: Does anybody else have any questions ...? [inaudible]

Unknown speaker: About how deep did it get?

RS: It varied. Along the road, it could vary anywhere between four to six inches. And there were spots inside that— you'd be walking, and suddenly you'd go into a hole and then come up on the other side. It was very irregular. But in general, it was an average, I would say, of about a little over two feet, most of it. But there was some deep spots. And I don't know if those are created by fish trying to make nests or whatever it was.

Unknown speaker: Was there tilapia? [inaudible]

RS: Tilapia was never on this island until it was introduced by UVI [University of the Virgin Islands]. Just like tan-tan. The tan-tan we have today was introduced by UVI. So, I could tell you all the good things that UVI has done.

KT: Any of you guys [inaudible] questions?

Unknown speaker: Sure. So, the land surrounding Great Pond is privately owned. What's your take on some potential future development that might occur? Obviously, you see now that it gets [inaudible]. What about [inaudible] in the past? They talk about hotels, resorts. What's your take in general on any sort of—?

RS: Well, when Paul Golden came to us, talking about development, we told him straight out he was crazy. Because the land in there is spotted with—oh there's some wonderful clay in there for ceramics. There's blue clay, there's white clay, there's red clay. So, anybody who wants to go in the ceramic business, that whole north section has got some wonderful clay in there. But there's sinkholes in there—like quicksand—and you can spot those real easy by the vegetation that grows around them and within them. But my grandfather used to have a lot of cattle disappear in there. And if you've noticed that the road from Petronella to Mount Washington originally was straight, but they had to make a curve in there where a gentleman was trying to build a store and a gas station. The reason that piece was separated is that during the rainy season, horses would come down, the horses would disappear, and the cart would float. And the same thing with cars. When the guy was building that, he had a backhoe sink in there. He had to bring a crane to take it out. [Inaudible] that because originally my grandfather had bought Hartman, and Great Pond was included in the purchase until the Submerged Land Act, and then he had to separate that out. But the animals used to go in there to lick the salt—like a salt lick?

Unknown speaker: So there were a lot of [inaudible] did they have any positive or negative effects on the Pond?

RS: No.

Unknown speaker: [inaudible] freshwater wells?

RS: There are open wells on the east side. There's a [inaudible] tree there that was where the entrance you could drive in to the Pond. And I think that's overgrown now. And to the left of that was their one good well. And all the cattle on the southeast side of St. Croix used to come to that well to drink water and then go back east. Because beyond that point, it was very hard to drill wells and find fresh water. Water was always brackish.

Unknown speaker: So we all know about (Krause?) Lagoon, what happened there. In general, what it used to be—the state of wetlands and salt ponds that we had compared to what we have now that you witnessed a lot of [inaudible]. So Great Pond itself is very important in its own right because of the [inaudible].

RS: I've seen a reduction of Altona. When they dredged the first time, they piled the sand up by where the little houses in that area. And everybody in [inaudible] went out there with sifters, sifting, looking for coins, and some found coins, but then the government leveled it off into the lagoon, and they're now—I don't know what they're doing with the mouth, but that was I mean twice as wide as in here. [inaudible] filled it in. Where the guys cook, all that's been filled in. Up by the Kidney Center. All that spilled in because Altona came right up to the road. When you went over by the Buccaneer, Altona Lagoon was right to the public road. So, I'm sure there's a lot of silt in there also that's coming down from St. Peters and going into Altona, so I'm sure the east side of Altona will be kind of shallow from sediment. The same with the one at Coakley Bay, that (mouth?) is closed now it's been closed for years. That (mouth?) used to be opened and closed, same thing with Sandy Point. I think Sandy Point is basically now all grown up in mangrove and then on the north side is a lot of trash. Because the north side is where the flamingos used to be. And the little pond that was in Cotton Grove, that's basically just a flat.

The eastern half of [inaudible] where the marina is, the east side is where the mouth used to be, and that was closed so that they could harvest the sand to build (JFK Project?). The lagoon in [inaudible] Bay, that one was filled in. The lagoon in Grapetree Bay was filled in, and that's now houses. The one in the valley, that's basically gone. Anything else?

Unknown speaker: Did you spend time in Mt. Fancy? Was that [inaudible] area?

RS: That was not the lagoon. Down by the point in the lower Cotton Grove by Mount Fancy Point—going east of Great Pond. There was a small lagoon in there—but that's all filled in with all the bulldozing that took place up in the hills, all that silt came down and just filled that up. Because you used to go in right where the entrance to the house is—you went in and then you had to go to the east to go around, and then you get to the bay side. Well, then, there is all ruins up against the side of the hill. Some beautiful stonework, and there are a lot of Lignum vitae trees in that area. I think both the blue and the white Lignum vitae.

KT: Well, thank you. Is there anything else you wanted to add, any other—?

RS: I could talk for the next week [laughter]

KT: Is there anything you'd like to share or interesting or anything?

RS: My wife told me to be short. [laughter] I don't want to embellish anything. No, but you could ask me anything. It doesn't have to be on the paper.

KT: What are some other [inaudible] species [inaudible] other types of wildlife?

RS: Well, there used to be the giant herons—the white and the gray. There was snipe. There were what we call—it looks like a hen. [inaudible]

KT: [inaudible]

RS: Yes, and yellow legs—long yellow legs. I never saw any flamingos in Great Pond. But after Hurricane Hugo, my brother saw a bald eagle over [inaudible] on the farm. My wife's a witness. We had a male cardinal and a male bluejay that showed up after Hugo. We now have what we call the night egret.

KT: [inaudible]

RS: No, it's the nighttime egret that goes around eating the Cuban frogs.

KT: [inaudible]

RS: Gets up on your roof, and you can hear it killing the frogs.

KT: [inaudible]

RS: Yes, catch a frog and then they beat it and then they swallow it, yes. I know we have what we call a Nighthawk because when you go at night, and you flash the lights against the hillsides, you can see the eyes reflect and—

Unknown speaker: Can you describe what it was like leaving a successful day of fishing at Great Pond? How many fish, what size of them? How did you even carry—

RS: You only went and got what you wanted for dinner, and that was it. You could catch a snapper. Well, we used to shoot mullet with twenty-two's.

Unknown speaker: [inaudible]

RS: Yes, you know what's amazing is [inaudible] where the highway goes down by the East Airport Road. Beyond that, towards where the (asphalt plants?) are, mullets used to come all the way up in there. You know what I mean? About six, seven pounds. Well, what really is disheartening to me is the parrotfish. I never did save a scale. But the scales were about the size of a canning jar. And we used to shoot them with rifles, and sometimes you'd get them up to eighty pounds.

Unknown speaker: [inaudible]

RS: Yes, especially around Easter. For some reason at Easter time when the tides were lower, they'd come closer to shore, and you'd sit on a high knoll and just put a shot under the dorsal fin and just wait for the waves to bring it in. And same way that we used to shoot turtles—with a rifle, just timing the turtle as they come up, and you had to be quick.

Unknown speaker: [inaudible]

RS: Oh yeah. I mean, you see where—just by Robin Bay where the houses are, where (Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Lawrence?) has his house. There's a little point down there—used to go and stand up on the rocks, and the snook used to just come swimming by, and you just take a thirty-eight and hit them. And you just shot one, and you went home, and that was it. You only harvested what you could consume.

KT: How do we foster or create change for people's—?

RS: Ah, that is a nightmare. Okay, first of all, you got to change the government. You got to change the educational system, and then you got to change attitudes. Because everything is “gimme, gimme, gimme” and “let me take what I can get.” So, there's no leaving for tomorrow because if you leave, you don't know if you're going to get. So you're going to harvest whether you're going to use it or not. All those attitudes have to be changed. It's a task that I think [inaudible] be accomplished.

KT: Do you think it's too late for us to restore the biodiversity St. Croix once had, based on the [inaudible].

RS: First of all, you've got to educate the young people that have not been exposed to it. You've got to educate the newcomers to what there was and what it did. It's a monumental task. The federal government [inaudible] got enough money to help it. We got a downhill slope. In education, we wrote our curriculum. And all the curriculums was embedded – Virgin Islands history, culture, and traditions – into the lesson plans. Education, no bias. Can curriculums produced by a company someplace in the US that has no relationship to what we're doing here, or to our culture or traditions or anything? I was a schoolteacher. I remember when there was a math question. And it said the train pulls so many carts that weighed so many tons. Well, first of all, the kids have never seen a train. And if you tried to explain to them how big a train was, and what it looked like, and how it felt when it passed by you. They couldn't grasp it. And that's just a simple train that a lot of kids in the States see on a daily basis, but our kids were not exposed to. Now you've got to ask our kids about planes. They see them every day, they hear them. They can explain to that. So, when you try to ask them—maybe you ask them anything about Great Pond they'll say, “What the hell you talking about? What's Great Pond? What's a lagoon?” When I was a teacher, kids hadn't been to Cramer Park from Frederiksted [inaudible]. Much less to Buck Island. Now, that's another pond that disappeared, the one on Buck Island. On the north side of Buck Island, there was a pond with an aviary. That's where the frigate birds used to go roost, the pelicans used to go roost, the egrets used to go roost because there was fresh water there. There were lots of trees, lots of manchineel trees. Well, I think the Park Service took all the manchineel trees, and they took out what they considered not indigenous. But manchineel were indigenous because the seed floats in the sea. Just like a coconut. And then when it comes on land, it grows—manchineel tree will grow right next to the sea. Just like a coconut tree. So, I don't know. I mean, what they did in Christiansted, at the Fort—all that grass, everything. It never was like that. And I've got etchings all the way back to 1756. And it was just a commercial area. I've got a presentation, a walk from Estate Richmond to Fort Louise Augusta. A lot of old, old pictures. And I'm trying to do a presentation. It's over three hundred slides. I narrowed it down from four hundred. But it takes you all the way from all the old [inaudible]—Christiansted looks the same as it did back in the 1700s. Very little change. But people don't appreciate that. To see how long our buildings survived, which is a tribute to the craftsmanship. That was a fusion of African skills with European architecture and so forth that created these buildings. And it's a tradition we're trying to revive with the Virgin Islands Architectural and Craft School. We're trying to rebuild the old Labor Department and the old Department of Education on Hospital Street to do that—in an effort to try to instill [inaudible] traditions into our youngsters, and hopefully, they are willing to learn from it.

Unknown speaker: [inaudible] tradition that shift from taking what you need to taking what you can get [inaudible].

RS: That really started—Buck Island had a herd of goat. And people would go out there and shoot the goat and feed their family and some friends. But then people were going out there, shooting them and selling them. Same thing—we had feral pigs. And you go and shoot one and feed your family and so forth. But then they started hunting them and selling them. So that's what's happened with a lot of—at least the deer now is overpopulating the island. St. Croix had a lot of wild horses, a lot of wild donkeys. And those were exterminated for the tick eradication program. Because St. Croix used to export ninety carcasses of beef every Friday to eat at Houston or New Orleans. There were thirty-eight beef farms on St. Croix. There were seventeen

dairy farms on St. Croix. And those came about when sugar cane went out. It first started with prohibition when they couldn't make rum. So, there was no sense in growing the cane because you didn't need the molasses to make the rum. So, those farmers that were growing cane had to switch into growing beef or goats or sheep. The abattoir that did all the slaughtering was at Estate St. John. And the runway was right across it in what's known as [inaudible] park. That was the runway. So, the meat was loaded into airplanes there, flown to Puerto Rico, put on a bigger airplane, and flown to either Houston or New Orleans. There are a lot of changes. It's not only the lagoons—it was a big village where [inaudible], just inside of where the [inaudible] was called Spanish Town, and [inaudible] Anguilla overlooking Krause Lagoon. No Krause Lagoon, similar to Great Pond, was a mile long. That had some trees growing in there that I'd never seen anywhere else on St. Croix—they're about forty feet high. I mean they were huge, and all the leaves in the [inaudible] were way up at the top. And I can't say there were cypress because cypress doesn't grow in seawater. But these were straight, and that's where the blue pigeons used to nest up there. And then we had a few parrots around, and they mostly roosted in coconut trees—they were noisy critters. Anything else?

KT: [inaudible] Thank you.

RS: I got tons more. [laughter]

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Cameron Daddis, 6/1/2024