

THE OUT ISLAND REGATTA

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This article written by J. Linton Rigg in 1959 from the book Bahama Islands published by D. Van Nostrand Co. Inc. of Princeton, New Jersey. Rigg lived in Exuma in the 50's and early 60's and worked in real estate. He was one of the first people to realise the potential value of beach front property in Exuma and developed Goat Cay as homesites for winter residents. J. Linton Rigg was posthumously elected to the Regatta hall of Fame for his work in developing the Out Island Regatta. As we move towards the 50th celebration of Regatta his article gives an explanation of how it all started from the man who was instrumental in making it happen.

Along the wharves in Nassau where the sailing vessels come in from the Out Islands, and at the Yacht Haven where the yachts foregather, will often hear this song:

Sou-Sou-East as fly the crow
To Exuma we will go.
Chorus—Sail her down, sail her down
Sail her down to George Town
Highborne Cay the first we see
Yellow Bank is by the lee
Chorus
Harvey Cay is in the moon,
Farmer's Cay is coming soon.
Chorus
Now we come to Galliot,
Out into the ocean we must go.
Chorus
Children's Bay is passing fast
Stocking Island come at last.
Chorus
Nassau gal is all behind,
George Town gal is on my mind.
Chorus
A wiggle and a jiggle and a jamboree,
Great Exuma is the place for me.
Chorus.

It is the theme of the Out Island Regatta, a fantastic native Bahamian party that is held annually at George Town, Great Exuma Island in the spring of the year. It has been variously described as a fiesta, a jamboree, a riot, a maritime version of the New Orleans Mardi gras, but probably the most apt description of it all was made by Mr. Carleton Mitchell, writing in the National Geographic Magazine, in which he described it as "Somewhat like transporting the Milwaukee Braves bleachers to a tennis match at Wimbledon."

It all started when the late Ward Wheelock visited me in my home at George Town in 1953. Mr. Wheelock having made a great deal of money in the advertising business in Philadelphia, decided to spend the rest of his life working for the improvement of

understanding and relationship between the peoples of the world. He had the very strongest conviction that therein laid the only solution to the end of wars. We discussed the various means of getting people of different races and nationalities to meet each other, and agreed that only when they met together to have fun were the results always happy. As my own consuming interest has always been in sailing boats, their design, construction, and the preservation of the existing sailing fleets, we had a meeting of minds, and decided that a regatta for the working boats, of the islands would go a long way to accomplish what we both desired. The only hitch was that of finance, and as I was unable to handle my own meagre resources Mr. Wheelock guaranteed the whole amount necessary, and proceed to collect it from American yachtsmen, who were immediately enthusiastic about the whole plan. Colonel A. W. Herrington, of Indianapolis, Indiana, a great sportsman, and a lover of the Bahamas, then came in to the picture with a brilliant idea—the forming of a permanent organization to finance and carry on the Regatta every year. And so was born the “OUT ISLAND SQUADRON”, which is composed of some 300 members, mostly yachtsmen, all of whom have contributed to the Out Island Fund and help to keep the regatta every year. It involves an annual collection of about four thousand dollars. One of the prime purposes of the squadron is to promote friendship between the working boats and the yachtsmen who visit their waters each year, and the burgee of the Out Island Squadron is cordially welcomed wherever it appears in the islands. When the hurricane of January 1958 hit the fishing fleet in Nassau, destroying or damaging a large part of it, the Out Island Squadron, within ten days of disaster, raised over forty thousand dollars to assist in replacing or repairing the damaged vessels. That must have made Ward Wheelock very happy, wherever he is. On the way to the Out Island Regatta in 1956, on his schooner, sailing from Bermuda, bound for George Town, he and all his hands on board were lost at sea, and never a trace of them ever found.

It was the hope of Ward Wheelock, Colonel Herrington, and myself, that eventually this regatta, although originated by Americans, would become an important fixture in the Bahamian Program of sporting events, and be taken over and run by Bahamians. This has now been achieved through the enthusiasm and energy of that remarkable young man, R. H. (Bobby) Symonette of Nassau, who acts as Chairman of the Racing Committee. He also happens to be one of the representatives for Exuma in the House of Assembly, and is Deputy Speaker of that august body. Many of the leading men in the Bahamian Government take a prominent part in the support of the regatta, notably sir George Roberts, Sir Roland Symonette, and Mr. Harold Christie, Mr. Paul Potter, Manager of the Royal Bank of Canada, acts as Honorary Treasurer, and Mr. Dennis Hickman as Honorary Secretary.

There are many things, which make the Out Island Regatta unique. To begin with it is held at George Town, Exuma, where there is one of the most beautiful harbours in the world, a harbour one mile wide and five miles long, lined with white sand beaches, and surrounded by pretty hills. The shore part of the program is held in a quaint little village, which is originally, has only about two hundred inhabitants, mostly black, and into which at least one thousand people, mostly white, arrive by land, sea, and air for a three-day jamboree. The Royal Navy usually sends a warship to show the flag, and to provide an honour guard for the Governor of the Bahamas, who always arrives in splendour with his entourage. The spectator yachting fleet comes from all over the western Hemisphere.

Usually there are fifty to sixty yachts, and one year a little ketch came all the way from Honolulu. Yachtsmen come from the United States, from Canada, from England, and some even from Sweden.

For the 1959 regatta there were over one hundred yachts anchored in George Town Harbour and eighty-five native boats.

In 1958 the Right Honourable Alan Lennox-Boyd, M. P., Secretary of State for the Colonies, came to George Town to see the regatta, and in 1959 His Royal Highness, Prince Phillip, Duke of Edinburgh, made it a part of the program on his round the world trip, stopping at the Bahamas particularly to see the Out Island Regatta. He not only spent a day at George Town watching the races but sailed one of the large smacks himself, the champion *Lady Muriel* from Staniel Cay, Exuma. He got soaking wet, but all hands agreed that he handled the vessel like a born seaman.

The actual racing is probably the most unique of all. There is nothing quite like it anywhere in the world. The boats are all lined up at anchor, with sails furled. When the starting gun fires there is a startling explosion of sound and energy, as anchors are brought home, sails are hoisted, captains and crews shout, push and jostle each other in a frantic struggle to get clear and away. Collisions are of little consequence, for there is only one rule. Once clear of the start and under weigh 'When two vessels meet head to head (on opposite tacks) they must both tack.'" If they don't both tack they are both thrown out of the race. In six years of racing this has only happened once, and as one boat cut the other in half it was not a very difficult case to solve.

The prizes are all in cash, and all boats, even the small dinghies, are measured on overall deck length, and handicapped ten seconds per foot per mile. We believe that sports should be fun, and this is it.