

Eleuthera Four—the Fourth Week

March 28, Thursday

I don't know where we crossed over into the fourth week—my stories are moving in themes now, rather than days. George's narrative has occurred over several days, from the pizza to the reading of his books, to this discussion with him about his poetry and his life.

Another project has been the restoration of the Hughes Elementary School mural. Lynn first had this idea as we looked at the mural and saw the condition of it:



Figure 1 Mural, before restoration

It's not real clear in the photo, but you can see the paint peeling, particularly in the upper third of the mural in the sky. But the lower left corner was also particularly badly sun-damaged, and the whole painting was beginning to fade. We thought the mural was painted by MacMillan-Hughes, who was the school headmaster, artist and town eccentric. Since MacMillan-Hughes built the stone cottages we are renting, we felt a real tie to him and we wanted to preserve this part of Tarpum Bay history.

So we went to "Mr. Johnny" Butler, the current principal of the school, and asked if we could do the restoration. Mr. Johnny (or 'Mr. Butler, Sir!' as his harem of female teachers call him) gave us permission, and funded our trip to the Rock Sound Hardware for paint and brushes.

We found ourselves prowling around the dusty hardware store, checking out the paint supplies. Eventually, we were helped by the owner, who is also an official

in Tarpum Bay government. It was clear he thought we were a little nutty, but then, what can you expect from a couple of aging American female tourists? He told us that the pitted lids on the paint cans were no indication of the quality of the paint, and just damage which was done by the salt sea air, and he gladly loaded our arms with \$6 tiny cans of enamel in primary colors. He also said he doubted that the mural was painted by MacMillan-Hughes, but only because he didn't think it had been there long enough to have been completed by him.

So we return to Tarpum Bay, and gather our other needs: an old school desk, some paper toweling, and a ladder from the school maintenance man (who had to bring his personal ladder from home because the school doesn't have one.) We were at the school at 8 AM, having decided that mornings are the time to paint, since the mural is on a west wall and bakes hot in the afternoon sun.

Everyone is intrigued. The kids cluster around us, and bring us sticks to stir the paint. They advise us on colors, and we give them lessons on mixing paint. They name the fish we are painting, and argue about whether the object in the lower left hand corner is a crab or a turtle. It's quite an interactive process!

We discover a signature in the corner of the painting, and it is not "MacMillan-Hughes", it is "Mal Flanders". That evening, I do some research on Mal Flanders and find that he was a local artist who lived in Tarpum Bay for 30 years. He had emigrated from Florida with his wife, but their marriage did not last. Flanders was quite respected as a painter, and loved by the Bahamians for his friendly and unpretentious ways. He had a home and a studio not far from George Major's place: Flanders' house was described as red and white and 'quirky'—George later told us that it was a water tower, since torn down. I also found a letter from Mal Flanders' brother, narrating how the family had visited Eleuthera in 2001 after the artist's death, in order to remember him. The Flanders family visited Bannerman Beach and left a Christmas painting in the lighthouse in Mal's memory.

Now the mural had become personalized for us, but in a totally different way than we expected. The next morning of painting, we made sure that Mal Flanders' signature was clear on the painting, and when the children arrived, we told them a little of the story of the artist who once lived on their island.

After a mad scramble to Rock Sound to get another can of white paint, we finished up on the morning of the second day. Like all artists, it was tough to know when to quit, and it finally became clear that anything more we did would be counter-productive—Lynn almost destroyed those little blue fish in the upper left corner, and I dabbed on a little more green and had a whole area of paint peel off in my hand. So, we quit—two mornings of three hours each, but we feel we had made a contribution, and we were delighted when the clerk in the grocery store on the corner told us how delighted she was that we had done this. We were afraid that the effort might be resented as an intrusion by the Crazy White

Ladies, but now I think that's not the case. And Mal Flanders' legacy to this little town is safe for a few more years.



Henry and Cora Sands

“Do you KNOW who I am?”, he demands? “Do you KNOW who you are talkin’ to?”

Speechless for a second, Lynn stares at the little old man, and then says, “No. Who are you?”

His eyes crinkle up at the corners and he smiles, pleased at her sauciness. “I am Henry Sands and this is my wife, Cora Sands. We’ve been married 54 years and that’s a long time!” Cora, sitting at her usual place on her living room couch, nods in agreement.

“And furthermore,” Henry proceeds, we were invited to the wedding of Charles and Diana!”, whereupon he produces a framed invitation.

“Did you go?”

“Of COURSE I went! They paid my way. But when they first asked me, they only gave me one ticket, and I said thank you and I am very honored, but I can’t accept your ticket. You see, it’s only for one person, and I have a partner, my wife Cora. Then they said, Oh well, we will give her a ticket too. And they did. So we both went.” Cora nods.



Figure 2 Henry and Cora Sands

Henry Sands received the invitation from the Queen of England because he was the caretaker at the royal retreat in Eleuthera at Windemere. (That's the place where Diana and Prince Charles visited and one of the photographers caught Diana topless by the pool.)

Lynn and I hear this story while are at the home of Rev. Henry and Mrs. Sands, buying bread. The way we do this is to go to their home in Palmetto Point, and knock on the door. We are invited into their living room, and we meet Miss Cora, who is sitting on the couch because it's hard for her to get around, and Henry, who has jumped out of his worn easy chair. They have been watching the big, flat screen TV in the corner. The house is spotless, and filled with photos which line every inch of wall space,

Henry shows us what's available to buy. The bread used to be made by Cora, but she's not able to do the baking any more, so one of the Sands' daughters has taken over. Baking is done twice a week, and there are loaves of white bread and airy dinner rolls, and usually some poppy seed cake or some other treat. Henry usually has some fruit available, too—today it's pomegranates and sapodilla. He gives us a taste of the hairy fruit that I thought was kiwi, but it's not, and he gives us a pomegranate as well. He says he has raisin bread, but he's not sure if we'll like it, so he gives us a loaf to try. "You tell me what you think," he says.



Figure 3 Baking Day at the Sands' Bakery

Henry is talkative today, and tells us he is going to Nassau this weekend to bury his sister, who died at 91 years old. He gives us a quick run down on the life span of many of his relatives, all of whom seemed to have lived an incredibly long time. Henry explains that it's because 'he don't eat no food with poisons in it like you get in America'. He says agave juice is a real tonic for him, and he shows us how he takes a long leaf and puts it in a glass. This he keeps in the refrigerator, and the agave juice forms in the bottom of the glass. He shows us, and downs the liquid. It's the only time I've seen Miss Cora disagree with him—she says it's 'too bitter and I don't like it'. Henry smacks his lips and says he drinks it every day.

Henry is also a minister, and has been for 30 years, he tells us. Jesus has been good to him and he thinks people should know this. When I look him up later on the internet, I find that Rev. Henry Sands of Eleuthera has been named Bahamas "minister of the year" at least twice in the history of the award. I also discover that he has a contract with an Eleutheran wedding service to perform rites for the rich white folks who want to get married in this romantic island setting. Ain't no grass gonna grow under Henry Sands' feet...

We go to school

It was to be expected. I knew it would happen! Every day, Lynn and I would hear the shouts of the elementary school children as they came to school or played at recess. The school, small and painted bright yellow, is right next to Lynn's cottage, and mine is just on the other side of hers. Walking past in the morning, we can hear the singing and the recitation of the 23rd Psalm as the children begin their school day.

They are dressed in uniform: navy blue shorts or skirts for the girls, and pressed white blouses. (George Majors' mother, Mrs. Godfrey Majors, makes all of the uniforms).



Figure 4 Tarpum Bay Schoolchildren

Lynn is a retired school teacher, and she can't resist—I know this, and I am not surprised when she tells me that she has spoken to the headmaster, Mr. Johnny Butler, and he has agreed to have us come to Hughes Elementary School to speak to the children. Lynn's done this before on her previous visits, and many of the children have called out to her as we wander about town: her particular young friends are the McCarthy girls, whose Uncle Matt is a local artist and entrepreneur.

And so we arrive on the Monday morning of our third week in Eleuthera. We've had some discussion about what to wear,, as the teachers are always formally dressed in dresses, high heels, and jewelry, and we have none of the above. So we have on our more modest resort clothes, pants and shirts and shoes and earrings—all of which feels very strange to both of us, accustomed as we are to bathing suits and tee-shirts.

We're right on time at 10 o'clock and our only problem is that Mr. Johnny Butler has forgotten to tell anyone that we are coming. However he tells the fifth and sixth grade teachers that we will be interrupting their lessons and they are flexible.

There are about 12 children in each class, seated in neat rows. They are trained to stand up to ask questions or give answers, and much of their lessons are learned by rote, chanting in unison. They welcome us with "Good Morning, Miss Lynn" and "Good Morning, Miss Judith." Lynn talks about snow in Michigan, and she's brought some photos from Traverse, the Magazine which show a cross country ski scene. I explain to them what a snowplow is and they giggle with delight when we say that our snow piles at home are taller than we are.

Lynn tells them about her travel adventures, and we make liberal use of the classroom maps. Then I tell them a little about Ireland, and the painted sheep and the leprechauns and the Irish enjoyment of music and dance. There was quite an influx of Irish in Eleuthera's history, and the McCarthy girls proudly admit to their Irish ancestry, though their brown eyes and brown skin camouflage the past. I finish by playing my whistles—I play 'Blind Mary', and then "Mice in the Cupboard". I say, "If you found a mouse in the cupboard, you would probably hit it with a broom, but the Irish write a song instead." They tell me they can hear the mouse scurrying around when they listen to the music.

I end with a hornpipe, a sailor's dance, and we talk about what it would be like to have to be on a fishing vessel for days on end, instead of taking your little boat out into the waters of Tarpum Bay and coming home with traps filled with grouper and snapper as fishermen do here.

Then the children chant, "Thank you, Miss Lynn. Thank you, Miss Judith" and they clap enthusiastically. Next year I think I will buy a couple dozen whistles to bring with me and give to the children.

Rich White Folk

A theme through this whole three weeks has been the segregation of the rich and the poor on this island. Nowhere has it become more clear to me than here about how vast the gap is between the wealthy and those without money, and nowhere is it more clear that money does not indicate a richness of life.

As we have done many days before, Lynn and I went exploring. We spent a little time on Double Bay Beach, and then took the road to the left, instead of to the right, as we had come. Bouncing along the calcium carbonate roads, pitted and potholed, we discovered ever more summer homes tucked away in the isolated miles of shoreline.

It seems that if you want a second home on Eleuthera, you find land which is serviced by the most daunting of roads. You are then faced with drilling through layers of coral and rock to build your infrastructure—a well, a ‘sanitary pit’ or septic system, and a cistern to capture rainwater. Electricity seems easier to obtain, though at great expense to have it brought. Homes also seem to have satellite dishes for tv and possibly computer access.

As we bump down the trails, caught between our fear of going forward and our inability to find a place to turn around, we suddenly note that there are electric poles and around the bend in the road is a mowed area, planted with bougainvillea and palms, and possibly a low stone fence. Then we come upon an amazing house, all concrete block and stucco, painted white and pastel, with curving arches and huge glass windows. Often there’s a four-wheel drive vehicle in the driveway, or a gardener trimming back the feathery evergreen shrubbery. Sometimes there’s another cottage or two, perhaps for a family compound.

We marvel at the isolation of these places, and the money that must be spent on the construction and upkeep.

We also are amazed at the ruins...the abandoned resorts which lie in rubble, with vines and brush covering them. There was a Club Med here once, and other vacation luxury of presidents and kings and drug lords. It’s fascinating, the discovery of the not-so-distant past and the understanding of the rapidity with which it can be covered over with vines and fading memories.

Lynn and I spend a lot of time looking at these properties, and at the resort enclaves where many white people spend their time on the island. People pay hundreds of dollars a night to stay in self-contained resorts, swim in pools, and party in the restaurant and lounge. I think what fascinates me the most is the isolationist mindset of the wealthy—the huge houses and the gated communities. I imagine they will never know George’s pizza, Godfrey’s rental cars, the wide brown eyes of the school children learning about snow, or the story of how Henry got invited to the wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Di. But they will say, “Yes, we have a place in Eleuthera. It’s an out-island, very primitive, but so relaxing....”

We think about a owning place in Tarpum Bay

Here’s what I think: Eleuthera is on the brink of a renaissance of some kind. It’s probably the WORST kind—I suspect there will be a gambling casino here before long, and Dan DeVos (of Amway fame) is putting a huge luxury marina and resort on the Island, and I just heard he purchased Bannerman Bay as well, to put a large resort hotel. The infrastructure for it is down there...there was a private airport with a large jet runway near his holdings, and there is a golf course

down there as well. Both, I understand, can be restored with a little effort and money.

Further north on the island, some new resorts are coming as well. We joke about the “Phase One Syndrome:--everything is under construction. Abandoned resorts like Cotton Bay are being restored and tourism is indeed picking up again.

Lynn and I are not interested in subdivision or condominium living, however. We like our little seaside community of Tarpum Bay with it's rickety buildings and quaint school and library where the bugs have eaten all the books. We like ordering up food from Miss Barbie's Take-away, and going down to the fish docks in the evening for grouper and snapper and lobster. We like our friends Matt and George and Miss Alice, and Mr. John Hunt who shows up three mornings a week to rake the dead palm fronds out of our sandy yard. And we both would like to be here for a part of the year for the rest of our lives.

So, we start investigating. We begin with Matt McCarthy, who knows everyone in town. We visit a couple of real estate offices. And we ask our landlord, Byron MacMillan-Hughes.

He emails us back that there are several possibilities. The one we like best is the sale of one of his father's residences in the town, the Culmer house. “All it needs is a roof,” he says.

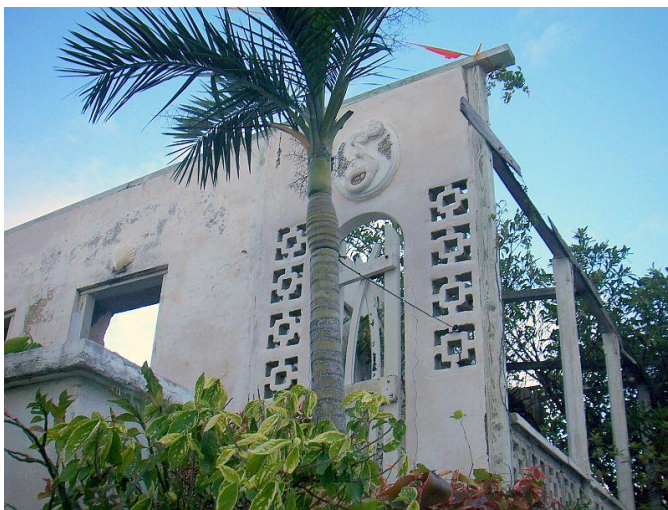


Figure 5 Byron's 'fixer upper'

Well, Byron, we say after we visit it, how long since you have been here to take a look? Basically, the structure is a concrete shell, with no roof and no floors. But we are intrigued. The walls contain the signature bas-relief of McMillan-Hughes pere, and some quirky designs and angles. We spend a lot of time finishing it

and redecorating it in our minds, and we ask Byron how much he would want for it.

Four days later, we still have no answer, so I think it's a dead issue.

But in the process we've learned a lot. One of the issues on this island is that there are three kinds of land: there is the 'crown's land', that land which belongs to the government and can only be sold by the government. Then there is private land, and there is farm land, which must be used for agricultural purposes. There are also different types of conveyancing: freehold or fee simple is the first kind. Leasehold the second kind and conveys a right to use the land for a period of up to 99 years. It may also specify the uses to which the land may be put. The next is the most interesting: customary land tenure, which is basically not private ownership, nor is it supported by documents. It is defined by communal use of the land and by custom, and is land owned in equal shares by descendants of the original group of residents of a community which was granted the land by the Crown in the 1890's.

The final property type is called 'Generational', and is the type most responsible for the apparent decay of many structures in the Bahamian communities. Basically, this land was in fee simple ownership, and descended to heirs. The heirs continued to occupy the land through successive deaths. Basically, then, tracing heirs is almost impossible, and the land is declared 'non-vendible.' It is subsequently left abandoned. It is also possible to become a landowner by 'squatting' for more than 20 years, without regard to the fee simple owner. Squatters can then petition the court to declare ownership.

So what did that mean for us? Well, in our American eyes, all these abandoned properties we see on the island are not able to be purchased, as there is very little available that has clear, transferable title. And we're thinking that our Byron does not want to sell that little house on the hill, upon second thought. And we're also thinking that we certainly want to come back here as a part of Tarpum Bay, most likely as short-term renters of the property of Byron Hughes.