

OUR BIG WOODEN BOAT

PART VI

By Dottie Fletcher

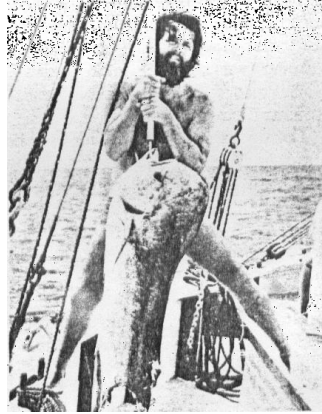
Photos by Albert Fletcher

□ The Marquesas Islands! We had read about them, studied chart of them, talked about them and dreamed of them. Now, here we were in those very islands. As we put our anchor down in Taa Huku Bay, Hiva Oa, two yachts were just leaving. One American, *Teami*, and one New Zealander, *Turquoise*. We were alone in paradise.

On the beach, little grass huts looked inviting. They turned out to be boat houses but none the less enchanting to look at from the boat.

We went ashore and it was a good hike around the point to the next valley where the village of Atuona is and the customs. Thank heaven the forms were in French and English. No problems with clearing as we had our visas and bond money deposited in the bank in Papeete, a rule they are beginning to enforce with the onslaught of so many yachts.

The Atuona valley was very tropical with



Albert with the 45 pound remains of a shark-bitten mahi mahi.

rnangoes, papaya, breadfruit, limes, oranges, grapefruit, and coconut trees everywhere. They all belong to islanders and are not there just for the convenience of visiting yachtsmen as I suspect some of them seem to think. In most places, we found the people very gracious and happy to give you fruit.

We excitedly mailed off our letters thinking in terms of copra boats and surface mail only to find out they have a plane that comes once a week with passengers and mail. Most of the islands do, the exceptions being Fatu Hiva and Tahu Ata.

We hiked, swam, body surfed and did some work on the boat. We tightened up shrouds and

stays that had stretched on the trip, did a bit of painting and general maintenance. We also did some diving and got beautiful cowries.

Humpbacks, tigers and snakeheads were the most common ones, though they do have a few other species. Thus the stench began! Shells are beautiful but I feel we earn that beauty by going through the stinking cleaning process.

We left Hiva Oa and went to Fatu Hiva very pleased that we had changed out landfall from Nuku Hiva to Hiva Oa as it gave us lovely sailing winds while we saw the southern islands first. The distances are not too far between the islands, so it is like day-hopping. A nice change after a long passage.

Our arrival at Fatu Hiva, Hanavave or Virgins Bay was, I'm sure the epitome of one's dreams of tropical islands; black lava peaks standing like carved Easter Island statues at the entrance, the valley lush and verdant and above the rocky beach a beautiful village, rock walls lining the paths,



Dottie and Albert pause on a hike through the exotic Hana Menu Valley on the island of Hiva Oa.

flowers in bloom everywhere, the smell of frangipani and tiare filling the air. The people were so friendly and hospitable. The first time Albert and I went ashore we were given fruit and loaves of fresh baked bread and leis or shell necklaces were put on us. Later we took a few presents ashore and I baked banana bread for them, which they really liked.

There is no store in this village so they much prefer to exchange rather than sell. The women here make tapas. Some are made from the pounded bark of the paper mulberry tree and others from the pounded

bark of breadfruit. They are quite nice and we exchanged clothing and a few articles such as embroidery thread, needles and perfume for tapas.

One fellow in the village, John, spoke a little English. He visited us often and brought Daniel, the chief's son, to the boat and they took Albert and Billy night diving for lobsters. I must admit a bit of hesitancy on the part of our men because of the sharks, but here in the Marquesas they don't seem to bother one. We saw a lot of them and many varieties. The men came back in about 1 1/2 hours with

23 lobsters and no shark bites so that wasn't too bad!

Christmas Eve morning Albert and I hiked up into the mountains and then got back to the boat in time to enjoy the williwaws. Actually heavy winds hit all of the islands and one boat reported winds up to 60 knots while sitting in Hanavave. We had been joined by several other yachts. During the blow three of us drug our anchors. Two of the boats finally gave up trying to re-anchor and left. We changed to a larger hook and our second attempt was successful.

We had no more problems as the wind continued to howl most of the night. It was a busy Christmas Eve, if not in the traditional manner.

Christmas was quiet and we all went for a sail on the *Ned Kelly*, a catamaran from Berkeley. The cat sailed beautifully. They reported speeds up to 26 knots on their trip to the Marquesas; that's traveling!

We left Fatu Hiva and visited the island of Tahu Ata, Hapatoni Bay. With prevailing winds, the anchorage was a touch rough and we anchored with two stern lines to trees on the shore. The next morning we awoke to the snap of a stern line and one dinghy on the beach so decided to move on down the island to some lovely white sand beaches we had seen. We visited three of them all looking like Polynesian paradises and uninhabited. We soon discovered why --No-Nos those mean little buggers something between a mosquito and a No-seeum. You never feel them bite, but suddenly you are covered with bumps and they itch terribly. One could put up with this, but if you scratch them odds are on that you will get a nice little staph infection. It is very prevalent in these southern islands and even

the native people suffer from it a lot. I would advise yachters to be well supplied with antibiotic salves and plenty of penicillin or tetracycline for internal staph infection. A bit of research on anti-biotics might serve one well.

New Years Eve Day
Albert and I took a six-hour hike to the top of one of the mountain peaks on Tahu Ata and it was truly beautiful. Looking down at the bays with their varying shades of blue and turquoise washing across the reefs. Horses roamed free around the hills. It was an inspiring and spiritual experience to sit and meditate on a mountain top, reviewing the past year's experiences and clearing one's mind for the coming year. Later that afternoon we sailed back to Hapatoni to join four other yachts for New Years Eve. It was quite a bash. New Years Day, the people of Hapatoni set up tables in front of their houses with food, cakes, and spirits and any yachter going ashore was invited to partake, no doubt a good way to start the New Year with a display of plenty and generosity. Volley ball is a very popular sport in the islands and they are delighted to have new

players, so the net was busy all day.

We departed Hapatoni and visited Hana Menu, Hiva Oa hiking far up into the valley seeing many old ruins. Here there was a very beautiful small waterfall and pond in every minute detail a tropical dream come true—until you stepped into the pool and sank in muck up to your knees. But for looking it was spectacular.

Then came our magical moments in the Marquesas islands. Always, it seems, there is one place that is very special, where all people, all events are near perfect to create the one experience that *really* makes it all worthwhile. I must say that it was the people of Hane, Ua Huka, that made our magical moments happen. We did not go ashore the first day as we were a bit uncertain of the anchorage and also a bit tired, but several vacas (canoes) full of children came to the boat. We inquired about fruit and the next day they were back with mangoes, limes, bananas and coconuts.



Moi works on a takeo (an ancient Marquesan spear), which he gave to Dottie and Albert.

They came aboard and delightedly jumped and dove from the railings and ratlines and consumed huge amounts of crackers and peanut butter (the Marquesan for peanut butter was “skeepy”.)

Albert and I decided to reciprocate for the delicious fruit by going ashore and offering to take the children sailing the next day. We landed without mishap and strolled up toward the village, which was set back from the beach because of no-nos, I am sure. It was like walking into a Disneyland of tropical beauty. Tiare, frangipani, everywhere beautiful breadfruit trees and the interesting kapok

trees not to mention every type of tropical fruit trees and flowers, raked green lawns and nicely kept houses with brilliant curtains flowing in the tradewinds. As we approached a grassy knoll there were three men sitting under some shady trees and feeling very foolish I walked up and said, “Do any of you speak English?” Imagine my surprise when one of them stood up and said, “I speak a leetle.” We explained our mission, uncertain of how much he understood. He led us back through the village to a bridge where several of the children sat and as far as we knew, conveyed our message. Hesitancy was on all faces but it

seemed they wanted to go at 7 p.m. Hardly what we had in mind. He then invited us to the store for a warm beer. Warm or not it was delicious. Then to his home to meet his wife and family of three children. Here, we found that he, Rene, and his wife Rose, were the schoolteachers. Rose also spoke English and quite well after she lost her shyness about trying. Delightedly we exchanged words—English for Marquesan. As we had traveled from island to island I had been compiling a small but wonderful dictionary of Marquesan. How delighted the people were when we attempted to speak their language.



The children of Hakamaï aboard Duen for a songfest.

It is truly an immediate breakthrough to arrive greeting them in their own tongue.

At this point the dictionary was small but before leaving Ua Huka it had grown and our ability to speak . We discovered we were the first yacht in four or five years that had come to Hane and tried to be friendly.

Living seemed somewhat communal and at Rene's we met Sophie and Moi and their family of ten children with number 11 on the way. Moi does exquisite wood carving and Sophie not only helps but is the calmest sweetest most

peaceful person one could hope to meet.

We went back to the boat that evening carrying many beautiful new shells to add to our collection and a feeling of warmth and friendship that was wonderful to say nothing of three vacas of teenagers who were taking Albert and Billy nightdiving for lobsters. That was what the 7 p.m. was all about.

In the following 2 ½ weeks we took many of the village people sailing; the few women who went along almost always became seasick.

One night following an afternoon of sailing, the

Tahitian Doctor, Michelle invited us for dinner. We wore our new pareos, gifts from Rose and Sophie, and the fellows wore shorts. Upon our arrival we discovered it was a grand ariaria or bon soiree in our honor. Everyone attending was dressed in their best western style clothing and one family had cooked all day. A huge pig cooked in a pit with bananas, breadfruit and sweet potatoes wrapped in breadfruit leaves cooked on the hot rocks with it.

This accompanied by the always present poisson cru (raw fish marinated in lime juice, salt and covered with coconut milk), breadfruit poi, watermelon, delicious cake and Algerian wine and coffee. Following dinner it was music and dancing. Rose and several of the women taught Dana and I to dance the tamori, the fast Tahitian dancing. Practically everyone from tiny children on up could pick up a guitar or ukulele and sing and play. Whenever Albert would bring out his guitar faces lit up like neon. Any yachtsman would find it a sound investment to have a guitar or two, a harmonica, and perhaps a ukelele aboard. The hours of pleasure will be more than ample reward for space consumed and money spent. The children all dance very well as they are taught in school from the first grade. The sensuous tamori dancing is learned from childhood. We laughed to ourselves thinking that any U.S. schoolteacher would be fired immediately for teaching such dancing. But it is beautiful and graceful and takes much practice to do well. The hand movements are much like the hula on slower dances.

That was another treat we had, the children dancing and singing. One afternoon Rene had all the children in school sing for us and we recorded it. They then put on a beautiful show of dancing.

We had so many dinners at the home of Rose and Rene that we began to feel we were practically family members. At first the table was set with knives and forks, but soon we were eating Marquesan style with our fingers.

One very novel experience we had was the goat hunt arranged by Chief Toho. Most of the families of the village were represented by a male member plus a few women. All were loaded aboard *Duen*, dinghy load after dinghy load. We then motored to the windward side of the island for the hunt. Auspiciously the wind changed the night before and the anchorage, though rough, was calm enough to land the dinghy.

The men were immediately off to the mountains and eleven goats were bagged that day. We were given our share – ½ goat. It was delicious. That night there was another feast with a whole goat roasted

over an open fire on a stick spit.

The night before our departure, a special dinner was given for us with just the families of Rose and Rene, Sophie and Moi and the Chiefs wife, Antoinette. It was a suckling pig with all the trimmings. We were crowned with headpieces of tiare and palm leaf and haes of tiare put around our necks. It is a lot of work to make these but Rose said, “Not too much work for good friends.” We were presented with a very ancient stone which was used as a fishing weight by the old Marquesans and which we shall treasure always.

The gifts presented to us were gifts of hours of labor and presented with love. Carving, handsewn articles so beautifully done one could hardly see the stitches and enough fruit to last for weeks. It was with regret we left Hane but the trip had to keep moving.

Perhaps the reason Hane Bay is not too frequently visited is the anchorage. It is very blasty and landing the dinghy always is difficult and often perilous. We actually pitch-poled twice, luckily with no broken bones but plenty of bruises.



Home from the hunt with five of the 11 goats bagged that day.

Pitch-poling a 13 ft. double-ended skiff on a moonless night in a roaring surf, trying to recover oars, floorboards, clothes we had removed to try and stay dry is one experience everyone can live without. It is rather terrifying to come up out of the water calling out to see if all four of us were above water as the dinghy, a heavy aluminum one, could easily have knocked one of us unconscious. Billy sitting in the bow had flown completely over all our heads as we went bow over stern. We said our prayers of gratitude that night. The other time Albert and I were taking a native woman, her baby and her dog ashore. She, being unaccustomed to dinghy landing, was just

too slow getting out. Luckily I had the baby in my arms as the dinghy went over so I was able to protect him. I am now pretty positive that infants have an instinctive compulsion to hold their breath as this tiny boy didn't spit a bit of water and was even too terrified to cry. Here again a few bruises were the only injuries. Dinghy landing and the millions of flies were really our only big complaints.

We next visited Ua Pou delivering mail to Rene's father in Haka Hau which entailed about a nine mile hike for Albert and I as the bay at Haka Hau was too rough to anchor at when we arrived there. We later moved *Duen* there and had more *kaikai*, or dinners,

at the home of Huta Kohumoetini, Rene's father. We visited beautiful but rainy Hakamaui and the rough anchorage at Hakakuti. We exchanged clothing for several ukeleles and bowls from Ua Pou.

It was then on to Nuku Hiva, our originally planned landfall. I must add here a very exciting item. As we approached Nuku Hiva we had a real battle. We always fish and most always catch fish because we work at it. This day we were dragging two heavy handlines and one 50 pound test line on a pole with reel for any little bonita that happened to be by. Suddenly the reel sang out and silver, green and blue flashed behind the boat.

We could tell it was a huge mahi mahi. We immediately put the boat in irons, falling off and back up again. Billy grabbed the pole and he fought that fish for 49 minutes. Just as the huge thing gave its final fantastic jumping display of exhausted power and fell back into the water we saw another body flash by. Shark! Billy finally got the fish to the boat and Albert gaffed it. The after one-third of the fish was gone and it still weighed 45 pounds. It was the largest mahi mahi we had ever seen. We estimated that conservatively it must have weighed 60 pounds. The world's record is 76 pounds and Billy landed this one on 50 pound test line. The head was a good 16 inches wide. During this struggle a handline went off. Albert went over and started pulling it in. He had about 20 feet of line in the boat went zing, the fish gave a burst of power and the handling went flying out of Albert's hands and flipped over his head and around the back of his neck pushing his head down into an iron bollard. With a big gash over his eye and blood streaming down his face and temper at boiling point he landed a

26 pound tuna. We were definitely in "fish city."

Upon our arrival in Nuku Hiva we swarmed upon the post office like locusts on wheat fields. What fun to get mail and believe it or not the December and January issues of *Pacific Skipper*, which by the way have been devoured by every yachtsman we have since met.

We visited the Taipi Valley delivering mail there to Moi's brother and this again brought forth great parties and more gifts. Taipi Vai was our last port in the Marquesas Islands and we left from there again loaded with fruit and warm assurances of good friendship. There was no doubt in our minds, as we sailed away, that the beautiful Marquesas Islands with their warm, friendly people would be a hard place to beat.

