

# 20-Year Gains In Virgin Islands

By Drew Pearson

ST. THOMAS, Virgin Islands. —On a mountain top looking out over the island-studded Caribbean is a stone bench labeled



Pearson

"Drake Seat," where Sir Francis Drake is supposed to have sat and watched for pirates and the Spanish fleet in those days long before diesel-propelled ships, airplanes, or such modern

detectors as radar.

On that seat, many years ago, my father used to sit when he was the first civil Governor of the Virgin Islands, looking out over the Caribbean trying to chart a more prosperous economy from the ruins of abandoned sugar mills and the rum distilleries that were no more.

The problem of prosperity was fairly simple in Francis Drake's day. His fleet merely lurked in the channel between St. Thomas and the British island of Tortola and pounced on Spanish galleons loaded with gold as they started back to Spain. Or, later, British and Danish planters merely imported more African slaves for their sugar fields and reaped a wealth which made that area one of the most prosperous in the world.

But the British fleet which once made these islands wealthy also contributed to their downfall. When it blockaded France during the Napoleonic wars, Napoleon developed beet sugar. That, plus the end of slavery, plus the purchase of the Virgin Islands from Denmark by Woodrow Wilson in 1917, plus oil-burning vessels which no longer need dock at St. Thomas for coal, left these islands poverty stricken and hopeless, with the Negro population seething with unrest.

## Island a "Poorhouse"

It was at this point, at the height of the Hoover depression, that my father took over. Herbert Hoover, who appointed him, made one visit to the islands, publicly branded them "an effective poorhouse" and went back to worry about things closer to home. That was in 1931.

The problem of reviving those bankrupt islands eventually broke my father. He left the island four years later, criticized and reviled. The white plantation owners conspired against him. The Negro politicians lampooned him. He was even accused of stealing four bags of cement.

But sometimes those who are reviled the most eventually are revered the most, and last week I was invited back to St. Thomas to dedicate the first public housing project in these islands. It was named the "Paul M. Pearson Gardens" in father's honor.

I had not been in the islands for 21 years. Frankly, I had not wanted to go there. Though my father was not embittered by the treatment which brought an early end to his life, I was. I had no desire to return.

I was glad, however, that I did. All over the islands are landmarks to the dreams that father dreamed, the dreams he made come true.

St. Thomas, where he laid the groundwork for new tourist trade, is now teeming with visitors.

## Scoffed at Organization

Half the population of St. Croix was unemployed when father took over. The three Danish sugar mills were closed and the Red Cross had sent food down from Washington for the people.

But last week I saw the factory, run by the Virgin Islands Corporation which he organized, belching smoke and gulping truckloads of sugar cane as fast as they could be hauled in. And I couldn't help remembering, as I watched a giant crane heap sugar cane in the maw of the mill, how the local plantation owners scoffed at father's organization of this cooperative company. Yet doing an excellent job of running it today is the son of the big plantation owner who most opposed it.

I still found some diehards who wrung their hands over "Pearson policies." They didn't like the fact that he put across universal suffrage in the islands, removed the requirement that only property owners could vote.

A few even deplored the fact that educational standards had risen, that new schools had been

built, that father had persuaded Tuskegee, Fisk University, Howard, Hampton and some Negro colleges in the north to grant scholarships to Virgin Islands teachers, most of whom then lacked even high-school training.

But even the diehards admitted he had done a good job on such things as the Virgin Islands National Bank and the V. I. Cooperative which now sells thousands of straw hats, handbags and native mats annually.

## Memorial in Hearts

After father left the Virgin Islands in 1935 he became Public Housing Administrator under PWA. That was long before the Taft Public Housing Act and it took a lot of pioneering to put Slum clearance across. In California, for instance, a law banned any help from Federal funds for public housing, and father undertook to persuade the Legislature to change the law.

But today, off the blue waters of the Caribbean, is being erected the Virgin Islands' first public housing project. And I know nothing would have pleased him more than to have these buildings for the humble and the poor named the Paul M. Pearson Gardens, as a memorial to him and the people he tried to help.

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