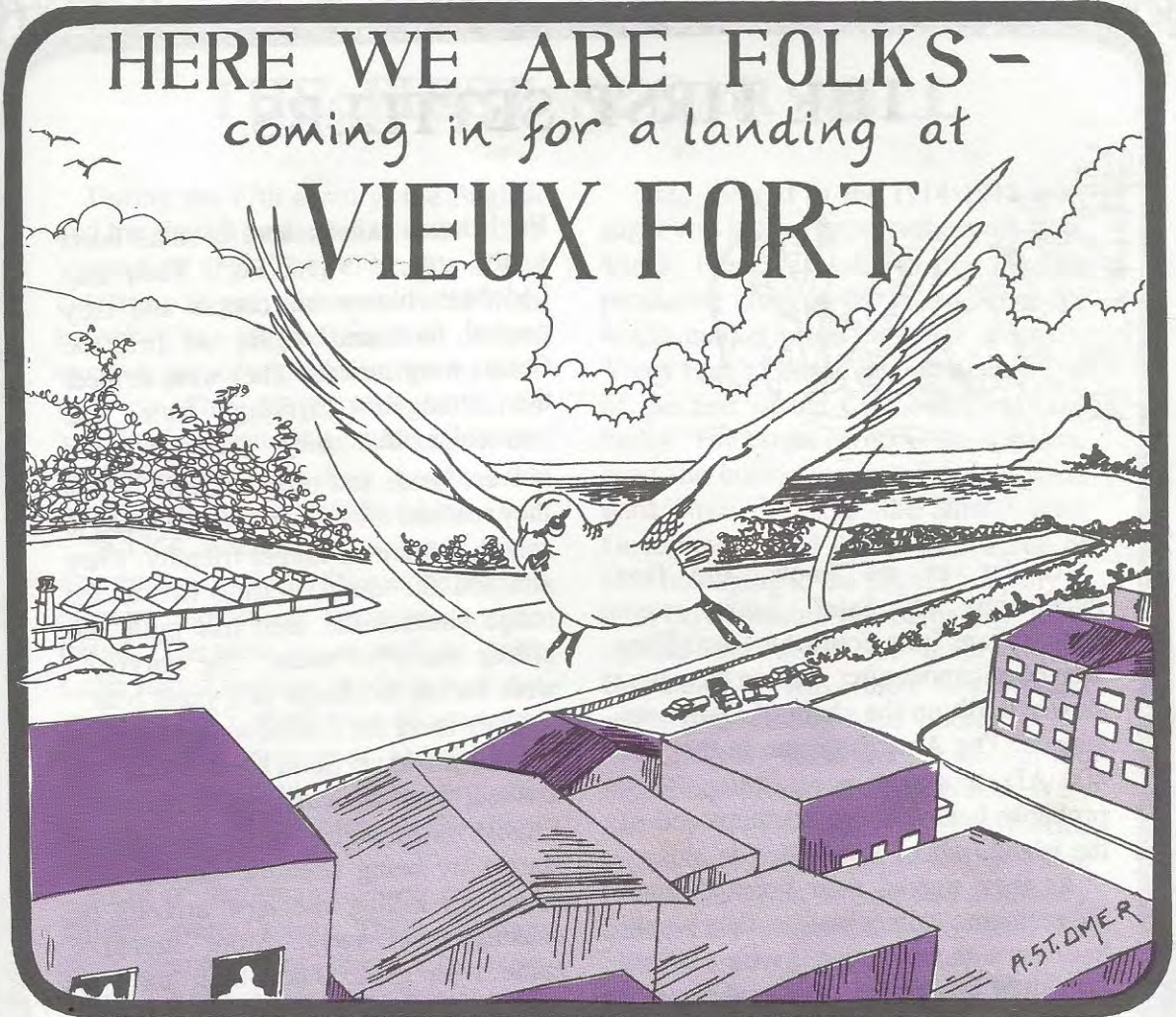


BUSH TALK

HERE WE ARE FOLKS -
coming in for a landing at

VIEUX FORT



VIEUX FORT

1. The First Settlers
2. The First Sugar Mill
3. Boom Town
4. Vieux Fort Has It All
5. Future Growth

THE FIRST SETTLERS



As far as we know, the first inhabitants of Saint Lucia were Amerindians from South America. They arrived in canoes after making their way slowly north up the chain of Caribbean islands. The Arawaks came in the year 400 AD or maybe even earlier. They probably landed at the southern end of the island, where Vieux Fort is today.

As they steered their boats through the reefs into calmer waters, they would have seen shores covered with a heavy growth of mangroves. The land was flat for at first but then, in the distance it rose up into jagged mountain peaks. From these mountains, wide, sparkling clear rivers ran down to the sea. There were fish, crabs and shellfish in the mangroves and flocks of very brightly coloured birds in the forest. Everywhere there were berries, fruits and roots that were good to eat. The Arawaks were only too happy to stay.

Unfortunately for the peaceful Arawaks, the Caribs who followed them were quite different. They waged war on the Arawaks, killing the men and taking the women and children into their own camps. For many years they ruled the island. Then, in 1605, a group of

Englishmen came ashore in small boats in the area of Vieux Fort. Their ship had been blown off course and they needed food and water. At first the Caribs were curious. They went to meet the strangers carrying fruit and vegetables that they exchanged for knives, beads and other trinkets. When they realised the Englishmen intended to stay they were no longer friendly. They attacked the camp, setting fire to the rough shelters the men had built and killing many of them. The survivors were forced to escape in a small boat.

Once more the Caribs were in control but not for long. Soon other foreigners arrived, French, Dutch and even more English. Although the Caribs usually started by being friendly, they always ended up killing the new arrivals or chasing them away. More strangers came with guns. They built forts to protect themselves from the Caribs' raids. One of these forts was at Point Sables. It was built by some Dutchmen to protect their ships when they came in to get wood and water. After a while they abandoned it, but the ruins remained. That was how Vieux Fort got its name, for in English Vieux Fort means 'old fort'.



THE FIRST SUGAR MILL

During the 17th century, the English and the French both tried to settle in the Vieux Fort area. They cleared land and cut trees to get timber to build their houses. They planted tobacco, cotton, cassava, ginger and other crops for their own use. They fought with the Caribs and finally defeated them. Then, for the next hundred years they fought each other for possession of the island.

In 1764, when Saint Lucia was made a dependency of Martinique the French planters introduced sugarcane to the island. The first sugar mill in Saint Lucia started working at Vieux Fort that year. By 1775, there were 61 estates in the Vieux Fort area alone and although cotton, cocoa and coffee were still grown sugar soon became the most important crop of all.

Most of the estate owners and their families were French. Their labourers were negro slaves shipped in from Africa. When slavery was abolished in 1838, many of the slaves left the estates. Some went to work in the town, others took up fishing or worked on their own small bit of land. The estate owners brought in people from India to replace them. By the year 1898, there were 336 East Indians working on the Vieux Fort estates. The Indians were not slaves but indentured labourers, contracted to work for the person who had paid their passage money. When their contract time was finished they were given the choice of money or a piece of land. Some took the money and went home, but most chose to remain.

Until the end of the 1914-1918 war, sugar was still an important export crop. Vieux Fort was one of the highest producing areas on the island. Then the world market price for sugar dropped. Vieux Fort's Central Sugar Factory, one of the first in the Caribbean, suffered badly. The estate owners, the workers, even the businesses in town saw some hard times. In 1939, the Saint Lucian Government sold about 700 acres of land belonging to the Sugar Company to the Government of Barbados. This opened the doors for quite a few Barbadians to leave their overcrowded island and settle in Saint Lucia.

That was also the year of the beginning of the second World War. Soon after the war started, America leased over 1,000 acres of land at Vieux Fort to build an airport and a military base. This meant plenty of jobs for everyone. People came all the way from Castries to work in Vieux Fort.



BOOM TOWN

The American Base at Vieux Fort brought jobs and other improvements. A new dock was built for ships to tie up alongside. New, well-surfaced roads were constructed to service the base, and a big, modern hospital. Wounded servicemen were brought there, on their way back to the United States. In 1960, when Beanefield was handed over to the Saint Lucian Government, the hospital was included in the deal. Now it is run by the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother. People from Vieux Fort and the rest of the island go to St. Jude's for treatment.

By 1960, sugar had lost importance as a crop. The world market price was still low and most estates were concentrating on coconuts or bananas. In the Vieux Fort area there were many Indians whose ancestors had come to the island as indentured labourers to work on the sugar estates. Some now owned and worked their own land or had herds of cattle that provided meat for the local market and fertiliser for the gardens. A few grew rice for their own use.

For the small farmer, bananas seemed to be the best crop. They produced fruit all year round and brought in a regular income. The banana industry grew very quickly and Vieux Fort became the port for shipping all the bananas grown in the south. The Geest boats would come alongside the new dock to load before going on to Castries.

In 1961, the 'Heifer Project' brought in new cattle to improve the local stock. There were enormous red bulls of a breed called Santa Gertrudis. They had



been chosen for the amount of beef they could produce. Others were handsome, white Brahmins with wide horns humped backs and long, loose folds of skin hanging down from their necks. Like the zebu cattle, already brought in by some of the estates, the Brahmins came originally from India. In that country they were not eaten but kept for their milk and as working animals.

The East Coast Road made transportation of people and goods between Vieux Fort and Castries much easier. This attracted more business to the area. With the help of two million dollars donated by Canada, the old Beanefield airstrip was re-constructed. In 1971, it opened as an International Airport and was re-named 'Hewanorra'. The biggest hotel in the island, the Halcyon Days, was built in Vieux Fort around this time. New buildings went up in town. New schools were built and factories opened, making clothing, electrical equipment, cardboard boxes and beer.

It looked as if Vieux Fort was all set to become the southern capital. Then, in 1980, hurricane Allen struck. The dock, the flour mill, the factories and many of the houses were badly hit. But, like Castries after the fires, Vieux Fort soon set to and started to rebuild.

VIEUX FORT HAS IT ALL

As well as the growth in agriculture and business, Vieux Fort grew in other ways. People became aware that it was one of the truly unique natural areas in Saint Lucia. The Maria Islands, lie just off the coast. They are the home of a colourful ground lizard (*Cnemidophorus vanzoi*) and a harmless snake called the courresse (*Dromicus ornatus*). These creatures are found nowhere else in the world. To protect them, and the many seabirds that nest there, the islands have been made a Nature Reserve. On the beach opposite the Maria islands, is an Interpretive Centre with photographs and other exhibits of the area.

There are many reminders of the people who lived in Vieux Fort in the past. At Black Bay and la Tourney there are Amerindian sites. At Savannes Bay and Pointe Sables are the remains of estate houses. The ruins of old sugar mills can be seen at Pointe Sables, Anse Noir, la Tourney and Black Bay. Vieux Fort also has one of the last large mangrove swamps left on the island. At one time there was a danger of it

disappearing like so many others, cut down for coals or development. It was saved by an OAS project, managed by the Forestry Department. At St. Urbain close by, *Leucaena* trees were planted. These trees grow taller than a man in one year, over 30 feet in three years! They provide quick growing timber for charcoal and so reduce the pressure on the mangroves. They also enrich the soil and their leaves are good animal fodder.

Fisheries also started a project at Vieux Fort. With a group of local fishermen they began to farm seamoss. It is grown on long cords attached to frames that float in the sea. When it is cut, the roots are left behind and so the seamoss grows back. It can be gathered from the same place again and again.

The seas around Vieux Fort are full of fish. But they still need to be 'farmed' if there is to be enough to feed the growing population. Mangroves and reefs are the breeding places and nurseries for many marine species. In the past they were often destroyed. Now, the fishermen understand their importance and are doing all they can to preserve them.

A community is made up of people who have different ways of earning their living. They have to understand and respect each other's needs if they are to live happily together. The Caribbean Natural Areas Resources Institute? (CANARI), the Saint Lucia National Trust, Forestry Department and the Department of Fisheries, are working together to teach the people how to manage their resources wisely for the future.

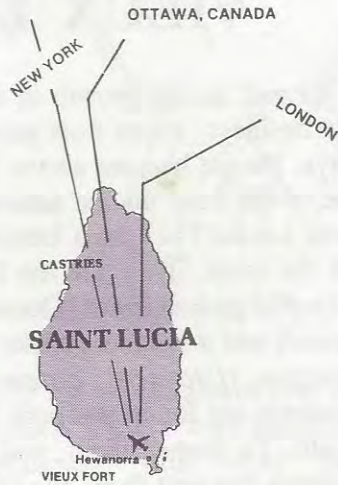


FUTURE GROWTH

The early Amerindian settlers called Saint Lucia *Hewanorra*. In their language it meant 'Land of the Iguana'. Today, iguanas, like the Arawaks, the Caribs and the sugar plantations have disappeared from Vieux Fort. The inhabitants of the town come from many places. Among their ancestors were English and French settlers, Africans slaves, East Indian indentured labourers and immigrant Barbadians.

The herds of cattle have grown and animals can now be seen wandering freely, even along the roadside. Not only cows but pigs, sheep, goats and horses. Among them move the cattle egrets, *Bubulcus idris*, long-legged, long-necked white birds that nest in the mangrove swamps. At Beausejour, the Government Agricultural Station, a small group of Taiwanese demonstrate new planting methods to local farmers. There is also a herd of black and white Holstein cows, imported in 1979 to improve the local milk supply.

Many visitors are attracted to Vieux Fort's beautiful sandy beaches. They come to swim in the sea, laze in the sun and enjoy the fresh seafood and the tropical fruits. Like the island's very first settlers, nearly all the tourists arrive at Vieux Fort. Most of them travel by road to stay at one of the hotels in the north. Wherever they stay,



when they fly out of Hewanorra, their last glimpse of Saint Lucia will be the Maria islands and the lighthouse at Moule a Chique.

The money brought into the island by tourism is an important part of the economy. So is the growing foreign investment that is coming in from the development of Vieux Fort industrial estate. Large jets fly into Hewanorra international Airport every day. They bring tourists from Europe and North America and provide strong business links between Saint Lucia and the rest of the world. The new jobs that are being created will help the people of Vieux Fort build up their town and the communities around it. They will no longer have to move away from home to find work.

Vieux Fort has so much to offer; beautiful beaches, some of the world's rarest reptiles and room for industrial growth. There are also the people who can make it happen. People who are no longer French, English, African, Indian, Bajan or American but **Vieux Fortians** and proud of it!

