A Visit To The Bay Islands

Reginald Wilson

[Editor's note: Laffite Society members Reginald and Betty Wilson have a long standing interest in treasure and pirate history. In pursuit of their interest they have had many exciting and interesting adventures. This an account of one of their adventures.]

In the Spring of 1969, Betty and I began to plan a month long vacation. We would fly to the Bay Islands, then return through Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico. On Utila, the Methodist minister, Rev. Bryant, was an amateur radio operator and I had contacted him a number of times. He invited us to spend a few days with him. The next island was Roatan. There were several Mayan village sites I wanted to visit and Carroll Lewis, who wrote Treasures of Galveston Bay said that I should meet Howard Jennings, if at all possible. Jennings was originally from Texarkana and was a suave, debonair individual that knew his way around Central America and was a "wheeler dealer." In Honduras, I wanted to see the Mayan ruins of Copan. San Salvador was the home of Laura Catani, an exchange student who had lived with the Seabergs and Jo Ann Wolfe. We knew her quite well. In Guatemala there were several places I wanted to visit including Tikal. In San Cristobal de las Casas, the home of MAF pilot, Jack Walker and family, was our destination.

The night before Betty, Larry, and I left, our children gave us a Bon Voyage party. The next day they and the Wolfe's drove us to the Houston Airport. Jo Ann was going with us as far as San Salvador to visit Laura Catani. We noticed a teenager seated near us listening to our conversation. While boarding the plane, she struck up a conversation with Larry and Jo Ann. She also was going to the Bay Islands! We welcomed her. Larry, Jo Ann, and new friend, Lynn, sat together. All three would be Senior students next year in school.

There was a stopover in Mexico City. All of us got off the plane and proceeded to the terminal for a cold drink. We asked Lynn who she was going to visit on the Bay Islands. She said her father, who was a contractor and lived on Roatan. We asked his name? She replied, "Howard Jennings." Betty and I looked at each other in a rather odd manner. Lynn noted this and asked us if there was a problem. We said, "No, a friend told us that we should meet him and we hope we will be able to do so."

The plane made a brief stop in El Salvador. Jo Ann met her friend and we flew on to San Pedro Sula where we spent the night before going the next afternoon to La Ceiba, Honduras. We made a point in San Pedro Sula to stay at the same hotel where Lynn had reservations. The following morning an amateur radio friend picked us up and Lynn up to give us a sightseeing tour of the city. We paid for all of Lynn's meals and went out of our way to make her feel like she was one of us. Once she said that her father was sure going to appreciate us looking after her! This was just what we wanted. When I had a chance, I asked my ham radio friend what he knew about Howard Jennings. He said that he was well known over that whole area and was thought to be involved in contraband. When we arrived at La Ceiba, Howard Jennings had arrived from Roatan, in his boat, to pick up his daughter. Naturally, we met him, and visited for a while. He found that on Roatan, we had reservations at Bill Kepler's Reef House. He said that he had to pick up his mail there and that he and his "wife" would like to have us over for lunch one day.

We flew the 30 miles to the island of Utila in a single motor three passenger plane. Rev. Bryant met us and drove us to his home. This island had just one long main street with almost all of the houses facing this street. I judged the population to be 200 - 250 people. His wife and son, Eric, welcomed us and showed us to our room. I found out later that this couple had another son that drowned a short time after they arrived on
the island. We had hardly settled in when we began to notice large cockroaches everywhere. If you opened the refrigerator, several would run out. Some ran in. The wife commented that they had a problem controlling the cockroaches! She cooked a chicken on Saturday, and left it out on the counter for us to eat on Sunday. Fortunately, there was a little store next door that we were able to sneak a few things to eat to tide us over until we could get to the next island.

Rev. Bryant was the only Ordained Minister for the 2 islands. He had 13 Churches and several Lay Ministers under his supervision. The Sunday we were there, we went to Church were the Reverend brought the message. You never heard such singing. The male pianist played with a boogie beat, and the choir and congregation sang "loud and clear" to the top of their voices. You then realized that many of these were descendants of pirates. That night, the pianist brought the message—which was unusually good. There was a small disturbance when two dogs wandered in and started a fight in the middle of the sermon.

While there, a guide took us to an area known to archaeologists as the "80 acre site". Here we found loads of broken Mayan pottery, Mayan clay whistles, and even an Iguana nest full of eggs. One day, a guide took us through a canal across the island to the ocean side where there was an old Mayan burial site. With just a little exploration, we found a burial of just the skull and long bones of the body. This style of burial was typical of the Mayans. Don't ask me why. There were several small mountains on the island. One had a fairly large cave that pirate guns, powder, and silverware had been found years ago. I asked our guide if there were any old bottles around that we might find. He took us to an abandoned garden that had been outlined years ago by sticking these old black, hand blown bottles neck down. We recovered several. The next day, 6-8 people were there recovering these old bottles when they heard we would pay 25 cents for them. We had to stay an extra day because the small plane already had passengers the day we wanted to go to Roatan. That extra day was used to hike about the island to inspect several caves for Mayan artifacts. When we returned, our guide said we had walked 7 miles. It was a beautiful walk among the trees including palms along the beach. The mountains on the mainland of Honduras could easily be seen though they were 30 miles away.

The next day, we flew the 5 miles to Coxen's Hole, Roatan, where we were met by a guide to take us to Bill Kepler's Reef House. The only transportation for this island was by boat except a short road between two villages. There were 3 cars on the island until 2 had a head-on-collision, so now there was only one. We took the mail boat from Coxen's Hole to Oak Ridge where Kepler's place was located. On the way we passed French Harbor and Jonesville. A pirate by the name of Jones started this community and for years everyone there had the last name of Jones. The Reef House was really nice. Kepler once had a fishing camp and three nice fishing boats in Cuba, but when Castro took over Bill got out of there with nothing. He lost everything. He then moved to Roatan and now ran another fishing camp, noted for Bone fishing. We had our own private cottage. The first night, he said the cook would fix anything we wanted. First we had a huge bowl of boiled shrimp, then we had a salad, steaks, baked potatoes, vegetables and key lime pie. What a difference a day makes!

Bill turned a boat and his guide over to us to go and do whatever we pleased. There were no other guests at the camp while we were there. We went to several locations on which I had archaeological reports. One, on top of a hill, had more sherds, broken bowls, and artifacts than anyplace I had ever seen. One did not even have to dig for them. We found two whole jars that we brought back to the States. We found a stone ax and a smooth stone hatchet, but unfortunately neither arrived in the barrel of artifacts that Bill shipped back to the States for us.

The Reef House is described as: "...located on Roatan Island, largest in a group of sun drenched isles off the coast of Spanish Honduras, opens an exciting new frontier to sport fishermen, adventurous skin divers, and relaxation-seeking beach combers. They are beautiful islands. Rolling green hills contrast with the cobalt blue of the Caribbean. Palm-fringed beaches surround crystal-clear bays and lagoons. A tropical climate, cooled by pleasant trade winds, completes this scenic paradise."

We found this to be a true statement.
The first night after our delicious meal, Bill Kepler joined us for a round table bull session. Howard Jennings was brought up. In preparation for our trip, I had ordered a back issue of *True Magazine* and a back issue of *Argosy Magazine*. Both had an article about Jennings and his escapades. Carroll Lewis had told me that Jennings had in some way been involved in a scandal in Peru but he was not sure about the details. I began speaking about treasures Jennings had found, etc., and off hand mentioned the problem he had in Peru. After the discussion progressed a while longer, Bill said, "Doc, you know things about Jennings that even his closest friends don't know." I answered, "I always do an in depth study of places, archaeological sites, and individuals that I might meet before I leave on a vacation. After that Bill really opened up and began to tell the whole story about Jennings and his Peru adventure. A few little comments by me, such as, "I know, he really had it," was enough to keep Bill talking. Here is the story:

Jennings was a happy-go-lucky treasure hunter at heart, much the same as Carroll Lewis. A few years earlier, Jennings had gone to Peru with a metal detector that would test down to 25-30 feet. He was more or less wandering around, lost for any specific place to use his detector when he was contacted by two brothers who had inherited a huge tract of land that was used for cattle grazing and some farming. They told Jennings that on their property there was an old Inca burial ground. They had experienced little success finding the burials because they were so deep and their method was just a hit and miss situation. An agreement was made regarding the distribution of any treasure found. Jennings accompanied them to their property and started their men digging where he got good soundings with his detector. Immediately, they began finding graves at 20 plus feet that had all kinds of silver and gold artifacts. This continued on into the third week or so.

One afternoon, Jennings best helper whispered to him, "you had better not go to sleep tonight." Jennings gave him $50.00 and thanked him. That evening all the local helpers left to go to a nearby village for a fiesta, leaving only Jennings and the two brothers in camp for the night. After dark, Jennings pulled his pistol, and got the drop on the two brothers. At this point, it was unclear if Jennings just injured one or might have killed one of the brothers. He tied them (or him) up, removed the distributor of the cars except one that he used to get the hell out of there. It is unclear whether he took just his share of the treasure or whether he took all of it. Anyway, he, in some way, made his way back to the states with the gold and silver artifacts. Jennings settled in Birmingham, Alabama. It was not too long until our Federal Government came knocking on his door and slapped a $500,000 lean on him for importing gold and silver into this country without a permit. Obviously, the brothers had the Peruvian Government trace down Jennings and complain to our Government. Jennings was able to clear himself by selling these artifacts to the Birmingham museum and to a private museum for ten cents on the dollar valuation. Jennings ended up with $36,000. This was used to build his Tudor style home on Roatan on Old Port Royal inlet.

The day following our arrival, Jennings came by boat from his home on Old Port Royal to the Reef House to pick up his mail. He invited us for lunch the next day. The following day, our guide took us over into Old Port Royal inlet where the pirates had lived in the 1600s and up until the 1800s. They were said to have been part of Morgan's men at one time, but had acted on their own at other times. This inlet only had a small opening. In 1670, the pirates built on one side of the inlet, a fort of stone blocks with about 6 openings for cannon emplacements. Opposite this were two small islands, the Cow and the Calf. The larger, the Cow, had a small fort that was said to have had two canons. Jennings home was built up the side of a hill on the mainland that had previously been the location of another fort with five gun emplacements. About 500 people were said to have lived in this pirate settlement. It was abandoned in the late 1800s (?) leaving trash dumps of broken plates, rum bottles, pieces of iron, etc. and even a 'man trap' that Jennings had found.

Our guide showed us the various places where the pirates lived, a cave where they stored their powder, and we found several pirate rum bottles. Lynn saw us and joined us before we went to have lunch with Ann and Howard. Their home had just been completed and we were the first to sign their guest book. After lunch, Howard brought out some of the Mayan and pirate artifacts that
he had found. He also showed us pictures of gold artifacts that he had smuggled out of Costa Rica for a high government official to New York to Sotheby's auction house. These artifacts had been broken into six groups. The first group had been auctioned off and this was a financial success. That afternoon Lynn took us to a location where a pirate house had been located. She was clearing it off and using a small metal detector to see if she could find anything. We learned that Lynn and her Mother, who taught school, lived in Austin, Texas. Her Mother and her Father, Howard, had been separated many years. Lynn said she thought her Mother had sent her to her Father and Ann's to teach her some etiquette.

We returned that afternoon to the Reef House. The following morning we flew to the mainland of Honduras to continue our journey. We never saw Lynn again but it was not the last we heard of Jennings.

Epilogue

A few weeks after we visited Howard and Ann, there was a knock on their door. It was a Honduranian Army Sergeant and three Privates. They told Howard that he had 30 minutes to pack his bags and come with them to the La Ceiba airport to be shipped out of the country. He was persona-non-gratis. Apparently the Peruvian government had caught up with him again. Ann was left to close up the house and return to England, her home.

A few years later, I accidentally caught Howard Jennings on a Houston TV station, talking about a book he and his friend, Robin Moore, had just written and published. The name of the book was The Treasure Hunter. Robin Moore wrote The Green Berets, The French Connection, and about 7-8 other books. I purchased the book immediately. The Treasure Hunter does tell about Jennings' escapade in Peru, but not the whole story. It tells as well as a number of other treasure hunts, most of which were successful. Incidentally, he did find a small trunk, using a metal detector, in one corner of the fort on the Cow. The bottom was lined with silver bars. Robin Moore was along on some of these hunts.

The last I heard of Jennings, he was in Florida until my daughter, Patty, overheard his name mentioned at a party in Washington, DC. She listened carefully until it was mentioned again. She then stepped in and asked if Howard Jennings was the person that had lived on Roatan at one time. At this, stone silence prevailed. One finally asked what she knew about Howard Jennings? She said that 5 - 6 years ago her parents had visited him on Roatan. They claimed up and would say no more about Jennings. Patty left but a few minutes later asked some one who those men were. The answer was "CIA!"

Another individual, Mitchell-Hedges, from England, was another visitor to the Bay Islands who had success in finding treasure. His find brought him $600,000.00. He returned to England and lived happily ever after. His story will have to be another article.