

Alene Hoffsommer Puts Island Experiences in Book

By PHYLLIS WRIGHT

Alene Hoffsommer, 2727 Monterey, is putting the finishing touches on a book about the Virgin Islands and particularly about St. Croix, which she speaks of with a bit of longing in her voice. She and her husband, Alan, and son, Marc, feel more than the usual tourist infatuation toward the West Indies Isle. It is a devotion that stood the test of a ten-year residency.

"Making your home in the islands is a lot different than seeing them on a Caribbean cruise," Alene remarked, and

her husband nodded in agreement. "It takes some adjustments and there are some inconveniences but we thought there were also many rewards. People who go there with the idea of staying, either end up hating it in a few months or they fall completely in love with the place. We happen to fit into the latter group."

The Hoffsommers went to the island 14 years ago when Alan took a job as a senior pilot with Antilles Air Boats. The Antilles line is owned by Charles Blair, the first man to

fly solo in a single-engine plane over the North Pole. He is married to the Maureen O'Hara, the movie actress. The seaplane service is designed more for the benefit of the natives than for tourists because there is no boat service between the islands. There is a fleet of around 25 planes — mostly twin engine "gooses," like Alan flew — that carry up to ten passengers. There are also two Sunderland flying boats that are equipped with four engines and carry as many as 140 persons. Alene, for a time, worked in the cargo office of the Antilles operation, helping to set up the system.

"I'm sure we'd still be down there if it hadn't been for Alan's health," Alene said. "We were really happy there. But Alan became ill and had to quit flying. We opened up a gift shop — called Father Neptune — and it was doing quite well, but medical facilities on the island were very poor and Alan was getting no better so we sold out and came back to the mainland to consult some specialists."

Since both Alene and Alan hailed from St. Joseph, this was the logical place to come. Alan's illness was diagnosed as a rare blood condition involving the platelets. Treatment has helped him considerably but he is still unable to work. Currently Alene is employed in the catalog department of Central Public Library and Marc is a senior at Missouri Western State College.

"I started writing a book about the Virgin Islands when we lived there," Alene explained. "I jotted things down and later compiled them into manuscript form. After we came home, I was so busy I didn't have time to think much about it, but lately the islands have been more in the news and I think there is more interest in them. A lot of articles have been written but they seem so distorted and unreal to us so we kind of wanted to tell it our way. So I got out the manuscripts again, brushed out the cobwebs, did a little revising, added a chapter or two, and now I'm looking for a publisher."

Alan is already the author of three published books — one on seaplanes, one on agricultural aviation and another on

resort life. Alene has had some poetry and one song published. Both are acutely aware of how difficult it is to get a book published any more.

"We could paper the walls with rejection slips," Alan quipped in reference to works he has tried to publish but couldn't.

In Alene's book, which is entitled "The Island on the Other Side of the Rainbow," she tells of their experiences as newcomers to the island of St. Croix which is 24 miles long and eight miles wide —

smaller than St. Thomas and larger than St. John. It is located 40 miles to the south of its sister islands and has always been considered a bit remote and stand-offish. Tourists come in groves to St. Thomas because of the superior harbor, but more and more are now visiting St. Croix so that tourism has become the biggest single industry.

The climate in the Virgin Islands with their rugged terrain and palm trees, is more or less perfect, according to the Hoffsommers. It rarely departs more than five degrees from the 85-degree mark and there is no humidity. The trade winds are usually blowing and precipitation is not excessive. Sometimes during the hurricane season, the weather becomes more stifling because of the stillness. Actually, while the hurricanes come very close, the islands have not been hit with destructive force since 1918. The natives say, "We grow them (the hurricanes) down here and send them to the mainland." But when the storms get dangerously close, the people have learned to board up and "hole" up until the weather clears.

The natives of St. Croix are called Cruzans and are quite a mixture of race and culture.

"Eighty-seven per cent of the inhabitants are black," Alene said. "This is something a white alien has to get used to — being a minority. There are some racial problems but they do not all involve blacks against whites. Some involve blacks against other blacks. Some of the blacks are extremely wealthy and powerful. They control the government. They are also quite handsome. Others are very low class and crude."

The Virgin Islands, now populated by more than 50,000 inhabitants, have a colorful history. Columbus landed there on his first voyage to America. They were settled, for the most part, by the French but they were owned by Denmark when purchased by the United States during World War I. They still belong to this country but the people now elect their own governor and have a non-voting representative in Washington. Property taxes are low and there is no sales tax. Income tax goes to Washington but is

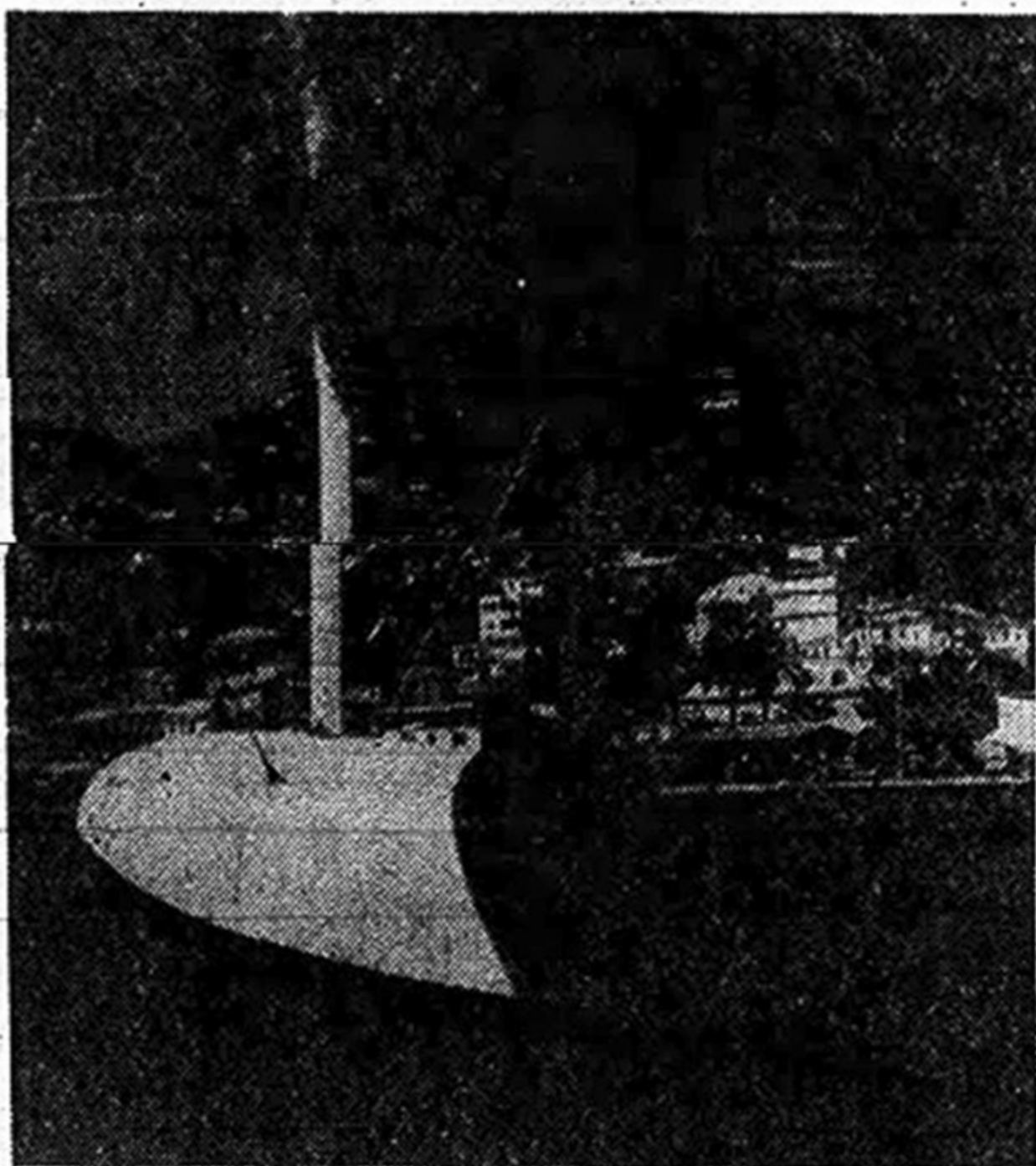
earmarked for the island fund. Residents are covered by Social Security. The government operates on a gross receipts tax which every business pays and this is matched by funds from the United States government. While islanders are not permitted to vote for an American

on very rough waters. When the incident was safely over, the governor thanked Alan for his handling of the emergency, but quipped: "I've seen you make smoother landings."

Slavery was abolished on the islands before it was banned in the United States. The slaves revolted and there was a big massacre on St. John. After this incident, the government of the islands set all slaves free and divided the land among the natives.

Sugar plantations were forced out of business during Prohibition because there was

no market for rum. It never again became practical to raise sugar cane because production was on such a small scale. The bad state of economy caused many land owners to sell their property cheap — often to whites or continentals as they are called.



This is one of the "gooses" or seaplanes that Alan Hoffsommer piloted between the Virgin Islands. The view is the waterfront at St. Thomas.

President, their young men were subject to the military draft.

The current governor of the islands is Melvin Evans, a black man who frequently used the seaplane service. Alan likes to tell about the time he had to make a forced landing out in the open seas when the governor was on board. Both engines went out and he brought the plane down

Today the land is valuable and natives are resentful toward the whites for their land holdings. This has brought about some racial strife — the most notable incident being the massacre at Fountain Valley two years ago on St. Croix. Blacks shot and killed nine persons at the swank resort that is owned by the Rockefeller family.

"Since St. Croix is so small, anything bad that happens al-

ways seems bigger than it really is," Alan Hoffsommer remarked. "Actually the crime rate is much lower than it is in most American cities but when something does occur, everyone gets scared and tensed up because it seems like it's right at your back door."

English is the official language spoken in the islands but there are so many dialects that sometimes it is hardly recognizable. Alene commented that it takes a while to understand the natives clearly. Their inflections are much different than those of most Americans.

There are some beautiful homes on St. Croix and some of the plantation "big houses" have been restored. There are also some slum areas in which the poor blacks and itinerant workers from the other islands live in deplorable shacks. It costs more to build a home on the islands than in the United States because of the difficulty of bringing in materials. There is a mixture of architecture but the typical West Indian style is most prevalent with its open galleries and pagoda-like roofs. The only drinking water is rain that runs off into cisterns.

"This really bothered me at first," Alene said, "because it doesn't sound very sanitary. But our water tasted good and no one seemed to get sick from it."

Electric power in the islands leaves much to be desired and the Hoffsommers were accustomed to power failures every day or so. The outages would last from five minutes to several hours and on one occasion the power was off for three weeks. Since almost everything operates by electricity — even the plumbing — it is a bad situation: no refrigeration, no pumps, no lights, no television. TV programs are months behind the schedule on the mainland and mail service to the islands is slow. The telephone service is even worse. Sometimes it takes two or three years to have a phone installed and phones are frequently out of order.

"Most people suggest that if you're not a native-born islander, you need to get away every few years or you get rock fever," Alene commented with a smile. "This is a

depressed emotional state caused by the isolation. So most of the aliens go home occasionally either to the States or to Europe. Then they come back and are ready to enjoy life again. I guess we were fortunate because we never really suffered from being island-bound. We honestly hated to leave."

In her book, Alene tells about the holidays in St. Croix, particularly Christmas which begins the carnival season that lasts until Three Kings Day on Jan. 6. There are two Thanksgivings — the traditional American holiday in November and one in October on which the natives attend church and give thanks for having been spared from the wrath of the hurricanes. She also will tell of the many interesting people, including celebrities, who visited the island while they were involved in the tourist trade, and will give her impressions of the moods and personalities of the island people. She will discuss the public education system which is among the worst in the world. (Wealthy residents send their children to private schools and later to colleges on the mainland.) She will tell of the boisterous behavior of the lower class Cruzans and of the black power movement that has added to the racial unrest.

It is a sizable book — perhaps 300 pages when bound — and will include photographs that the couple collected in the islands.

(Shortly after the interview with this reporter, Alan took a flight to St. Croix to visit some old friends, attend to some personal business and collect current data for his wife's book.)

"Despite the odd ways of the island people and the many inconveniences, we still loved it," the Hoffsommers concluded. "Life seems strangely narrow and sheltered now that we are back home. We came in contact with so many fascinating people and learned to appreciate their differences. We had good friends among the blacks as well as the whites. We missed the seasons but still we learned to recognize and anticipate the subtle climatic changes during the year on the islands. It's another world out there — and we are glad to have been a part of it."



Alene Hoffsommer is shown at her typewriter as she works on the manuscript to her book about St. Croix.