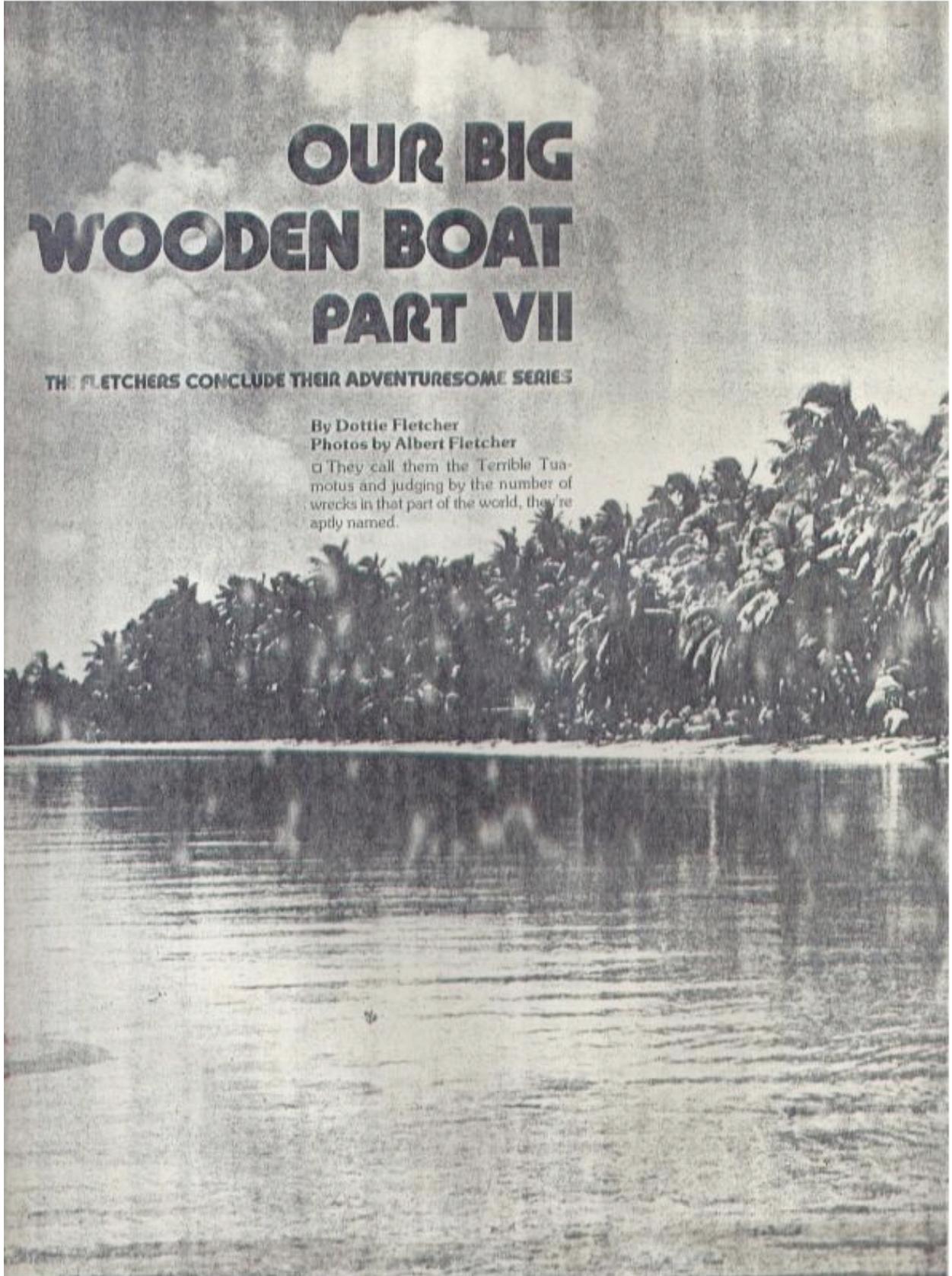


OUR BIG WOODEN BOAT PART VII

THE FLETCHERS CONCLUDE THEIR ADVENTURESOME SERIES

By Dottie Fletcher
Photos by Albert Fletcher

□ They call them the Terrible Tuamotus and judging by the number of wrecks in that part of the world, they're aptly named.



The atolls are very low quite a contrast to the lush green pinnacles of Tahiti and the currents are strong. Add numerous squalls that reduce visibility to practically zero and they become one of the most dangerous places in the Pacific in which to sail.

But they also were paradise.

We left the Marquesas on January 30th at 0755 for the 430-mile jaunt. Light winds prevailed that were punctuated with rain squalls and desperately hot weather. Then on February 2nd at 0630, Billy spotted land. Our navigation was right on -- always a good feeling and especially so for this passage.

The island looked beautiful and as we approached the atoll of Takaroa, we saw huge waves roll across the coral to break on the beach. We first saw a large wreck, then a smaller one, which gave us reason enough to take these islands seriously.

It turned out the first was a giant old sailing ship named the County of Roxburgh which was built in Glasgow in 1886. She was 2121 gross tons, had a LOA of 285.6 feet, a beam of 43.5 feet and a depth of 24 feet. She was a four masted, iron, fully rigged ship. According to the account given in Lubbocks "Last of the Windjammers" the County of Roxburgh was overwhelmed by the furious hurricane of 1905. Her sails were blown out and she was hurled before the storm until,



Some shell art decorating a Takaroan home.

in the evening of Feb. 8, 1905, they saw breakers. An attempt was made to lower a lifeboat holding ten men, but it was immediately sunk. Ten minutes later, with the ship being swept from end to end by raging surf reckoned to be 75 feet high, a mountainous surge carried the ship right over the reef then across hundreds of yards of coral flats and finally deposited her high on the beach. And there her skeleton remains, a warning to all sailors. The second wreck was more recent and was a fairly modern fishing boat.

As we sailed down the coast it was hot and sunny. But when we arrived at the pass a rain squall with lots of wind bore down on us so we

stood off until it passed. This was our first pass through an atoll and we were all rather edgy about it though there were some stakes marking the reef and of course great breakers showing it also. Can't say they did much for our confidence, however.

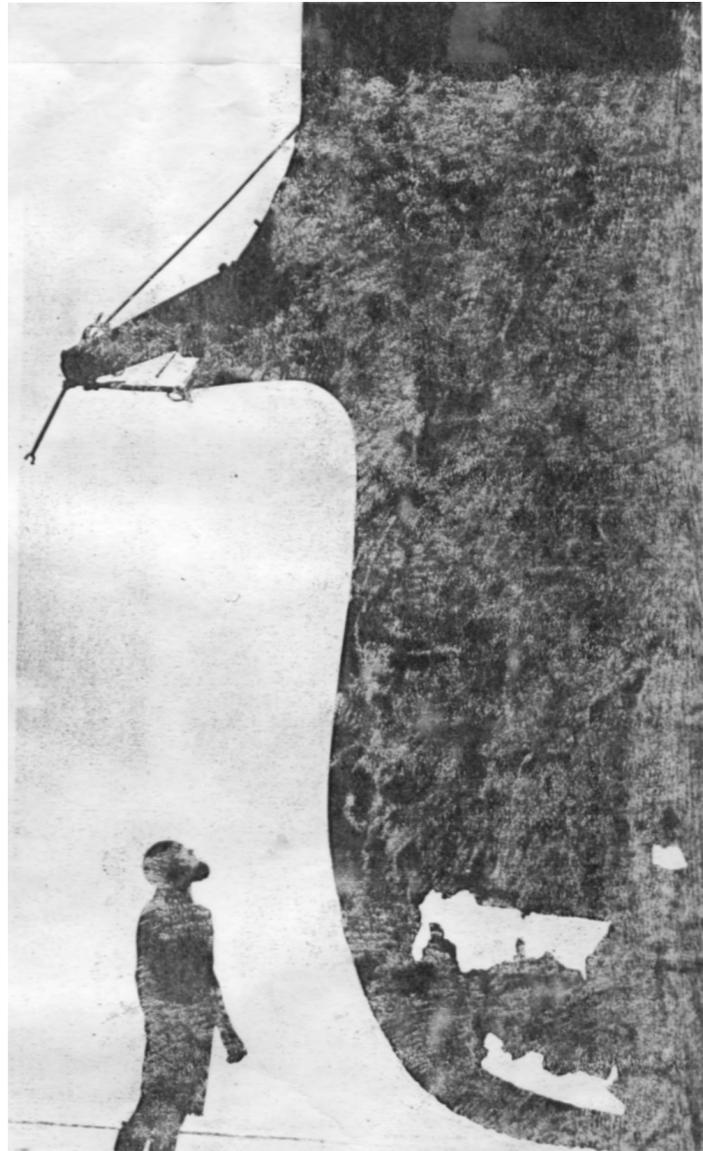
Billy was in the spreaders, Dana standing at the bottom of the mast to relay directions to me to give to Albert at the wheel. We didn't want any mix-ups at this point. The current was right but it was still scary. We zoomed in through the outer pass and there was a small village with a dock. But we had in mind to go right on into the lagoon so we waved at the people on the dock and sped right by. Suddenly Dana yelled "It ends!" Billy yelled "No, it doesn't, but take a hard left by the next stick." As we looked it seemed impossible. Tide rips were boiling and churning where the pass made a 90-degree turn to the left. Albert spun the wheel and we turned then the bow hit the calm water and the stern started squirreling around. The fathometer showed practically no water so it was close, then we were through. Whew! Big sighs of relief but wait, we still had a few miles to go through a coral infested lagoon. With Billy in the spreaders we made it fine and anchored on the far side of Takaroa lagoon just as the sun was getting too low for good observation.

Cocktails on deck as we each congratulated the other our first pass nicely behind us. Never mind about getting out, we would worry about that later.

Takaroa lagoon was very pretty but not crystal clear and blue as we expected. We were later told that it had been in the past but over the last six years it had been getting cloudier. Perhaps not enough water moved in and out as this atoll is completely surrounded by motus, or islands, except for a few shallow passes and one navigatable one.

Here we dove, got and ate our first *Tridacna* clams, the famous “man-eating clams.” We never saw any that big but did see some good sized ones. They were just beautiful in the water with their 1000 eyes peeking out of either blue, green or brown mantles. For eating they are rather strong and rich. We were not too impressed.

The second day we were at anchor a man and three children came to the closest motu and worked the copra. We went over to talk to him and found that he spoke a little English. The language in these islands is Pau Motu which is very similar to Tahitian and Maori but not a bit like Marquesan. Most speak a little French, which was more French that I spoke. Dana had been studying a bit on the trip but definitely was in the three or four sentence class at that



point. Henree, our new acquaintance, asked us to come to the dock because the villagers wanted to meet us. We assured him we would the next day.

We left for the pass early, for better visibility, but it still looked scary as ever. We had just decided to go for it when a small speedboat came whizzing up from the other end of the lagoon and a fellow jumped

aboard and took over the wheel. It was definitely a learning experience as we watched with bated breath as he simply let the current take the boat. Then when it looked as if we would certainly go on the reef he spun the wheel and the current did the rest. We were through.

We tied up with much help and started getting acquainted.

The village consisted of about 65 people. At one time it had been much larger and the empty houses testified to this fact. The small houses were decorated with shells to the point of disbelief.

Tahitian cowries were used the most along with other shells. They certainly were making beautiful use of the natural resources. We traded clothes for cowrie leis and headpieces. A good exchange for both. In this village of 65 people there are three active churches, two Mormon and one Catholic. The Catholic denomination accounted for only ten people. The Mormons assured us they tried every day to convert the Catholics!! What resistance they must have.

The second day at the dock we looked out to see two sails in the distance and were soon joined at the dock by two yachts from Alaska, *Rodonis* and *Desperado*. Both yachts had families with teenagers aboard and had kept company all the way from Seattle. With three yachts tied up to the dock, Takaroa was jumping, but lo and behold, the next day the yacht *Banshee* from San Diego arrived. This called for a boat potluck dinner followed by a poker game, native music and dancing on the dock.

The next day Canadian boat, *Windbourne*, arrived and we almost set a new record for Takaroa – five yachts at once. Not exactly

the quiet secluded place we had hoped for but definitely fun. Actually there had been six yachts in Takaroa at one-time years ago. Had we not left it would have happened again since the yacht *Hyades*, arrived the day after our departure.

Although the wind was lousy we had decided to leave even if we had to motor part way. At this time of the year one couldn't depend on nice steady trade winds. On February 13th at 2100, slack water, we said our "parahis" to natives and yachters alike and out through the pass we went headed for Aratika, again delivering mail.

Upon our arrival at Aratika we went right by the pass. Not that we didn't see it, we just couldn't believe it! It looked very small and the water was pouring out at a tremendous rate. This was about 1030 so we just drifted about until almost 1600. It then looked slack or nearly so and went in. It actually was a much easier pass than Takaroa, it just didn't look it.

The water was crystal clear and the lagoon full of coral heads and small islets. Some of the islets had small houses and some just coconut palms. We anchored behind one of these little islets for the night by just taking our anchor in the dinghy and placing it in the coral.

Early in the morning we were visited by two men from the village, Mahimui

and Denis, who invited us to come to the village. The next day, Denis, who spoke a little English brought his wife, Felicite and son, Jacob to visit us. We made plans to go to the village the following day and have dinner ashore. We would take food and they would fix some. That morning the yachts *Rodonis* and *Hyades* arrived and we invited them for dinner which turned out to be quite an ariaaria (party).

When we arrived at the shore there was a beautiful table, a cement slab, and the women had plaited palm fronds to make the table cover. Long runners of plaited palm fronds were placed down each side to sit on. The bowls were quickly plaited and our plates were four round leaves fastened together with a little splinter of wood. At each place was a drinking coconut and half coconut shell which contained a delicious sauce to dip the poisson cru in. The sauce was similar to the Marquesan sauce but with lots of garlic. Fingers are your utensils, making dishwashing easy. Just tip over the table for the dogs and stick your hands in the sea a few steps away. I must be perfectly truthful and say that after our first dinner the women brought us bowls of water and towels.

After we were better acquainted, however, It was the sea!

Compared to Aratika, Takaroa had been the big city. Aratika had a steady population of ten people in the village, two people at the far end of the atoll and a few persons who owned motus with copra who visited and worked occasionally. The village had three women and two children. Emilio was about one year old and Jacob about two and one-half. They were the pride and joy of everyone in the village, because the mortality rate for children is high. We discovered the reason for this when the day before we were leaving, Tyrone who spoke fairly good English, came to the boat and said they had a big problem in the village. One of the men, Andre, and little Jacob were sick. Jacob had a fever of 106 degrees. Eventually half of the village got sick.

It seemed a type of the flu. We treated it with alcohol baths, to lower the temperature, aspirin, lots of liquid and, where needed, mineral oil. Not being medical people we did for them what we would have done for ourselves. Both babies were very ill but, in four days they were much better. We treated one ear infection and after much perusal of our medical book we decided one fellow had an umbilical hernia and obstruction. We gave him consecutive small doses of mineral oil and took away his oheipa (very heavy unleavened, boiled bread).

By the next afternoon, and four disposals of mineral oil, he was feeling like a new man. In retrospect, we feel that without just the simplest of treatment either one of the babies might have expired because of the extremely high fevers.

We spent a lot of time in Aratika wandering on the reefs, beachcombing the windward beaches and diving for shells. We added greatly to our shell collection. A huge triton, a gift from Andre was the most spectacular shell we added.

We paddled in their outrigger canoes and the people of the village went sailing with us in the calm, clear waters of the inner lagoon. With the steady tradewinds and flat water it was definitely optimum sailing. We had buffet dinners on the boat, many dinners on shore and lots of nights of music and dancing. Mahimui could really play the guitar and most everyone played the ukulele. One night the music was so intense that the men began doing the Tahitian grunting. I don't know a better way to describe it but it is very intense and sensual. As the woman danced faster and faster the grunting got faster and louder. I surely was sorry we didn't get that recorded but it was such a good party I was much more into dancing. So the recording is all mental but will last in my mind.

At the far end of the atoll lived a beautiful young couple named Tutu and Armelle. They had both lived in Tahiti and both worked for Marlon Brando on his Island of Tetiaroa. Now they had their own hotel called the Vahituri Hotel which means tranquil place. In two years they had built seven bungalows for sleeping, and bungalows for kitchen, dining room, bar and restrooms. They had cleared and built a small, rather crude airstrip on which a six passenger plane could land. On this quite remote atoll you can really get away from it all.

When they weren't busy with their hotel they were busy with their pearls. Tutu, a "nach" driver, dives as deep as 30 meters, sans tank, to get the pearl oysters. They string the oysters a special way, ten to a string. Keeping them alive, they seed them, one to each side of the oyster shell (inside) for pearls, and twice on each side to grow the flat-backed pearl they use for rings and jewelry. He has a reservation of 40,000 oysters, which hang from lines like underwater clotheslines in the lagoon. They have a little house, built on stilts, where they harvest and work on the pearls.

With the flat-backed pearls Tutu has about 90 percent return but on the cultured pearls the return is between 70-75 per cent

It takes about two years for a pearl to fully develop. For a regular white pearl he receives approximately 1500 francs but for a black pearl he receives as much as 5000 francs. Of course there are only about 20 black pearls out of the seeded 40,000. I should add that the francs I speak of are French Pacific Francs (FCP) which at the moment are about 87.50 for one American dollar.

The two biggest dangers in this business are sharks and taravana. The sharks are quite numerous and big. Taravana is a condition caused by Lack of oxygen occurring when the nachra divers go too deep. It was an interesting occupation to learn about and we left with beautiful oyster shells bearing four flat-backed pearls. Perhaps someday one of them will turn into a ring!

We spent 23 days on just two small atolls. We really would have liked to visit many more but it was necessary to go to Tahiti to renew our visas and to meet Billy's mother and aunt who were flying to Papeete to visit. After 23 days Albert was almost convinced that

he really would like living on an atoll. The people of Aratika were so delighted by the prospect that they assured us they would give us "one small motu to live on."

That idea would, require a great deal of thought for though it seemed tranquil and idyllic it definitely is a long, long way from nowhere. So, back to *Duen*, mobility and the Society Islands.



Above: A typical feast in Aratika.

Below: Armelle and Tutu pose in front of their retreat hotel ... the most isolated hotel we have seen in our travels

