

The Talk of Virgin Islands;
GROWTH BRINGS PROBLEMS TO VIRGIN ISLANDS AS IMMIGRATION PUTS
A STRAIN ON SERVICES

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Body

The water pipes, recalcitrant on the golf greens and nearly always dry in the housing projects, had been coughing air downtown for six days. Ann Johnson, proprietor of The Snack Box, a local lunch counter, apologized for the paper plates and cups.

"We've had a water emergency since December 1976," she said. "We got the garbage emergency in January 1979; they cut off the downtown pickups. We have power emergencies and the road emergency, and then we have the school emergency. The only emergency we don't have is on sunshine."

Growth brings problems to **Virgin Islands** as **immigrations puts** a **strain**

She stood, flushing pink in the heat, watching the hamburgers on the propane grill. "I've been mugged, hit over the head with a gun, and every member of my family has been robbed. And groceries," she sighed. "We used to say that no matter what you bought, it was \$10 a sack. Now it's \$30. The price of food is higher than it is in Washington, D.C."

The Johnsons came to St. Thomas from the mainland 18 years ago, but now they are thinking of going back. "We have the feeling we're not wanted," Mrs. Johnson said.

When the jet plane opened the **Virgin Islands**, a United States territory, to large-scale tourism in the 1960's, and to large-scale industrial development, the Johnsons were only two in a torrent of outsiders who flooded into the **islands** to share in the boom. There were merchants, construction workers, hotel workers and refinery workers. Some, like the Johnsons, black as well as white, came from the states because they were looking for a tropical way of life. Others, mostly black, came from the desperately poor **islands** of the Eastern Caribbean, looking only for a few dollars to send home.

As the population tripled, to 95,214 from 32,000 from 1960 to 1980, the school enrollment quadrupled. The number of telephones rose to 41,174, from 3,905, and the number of cars grew to 37,889, from 4,264.

The electrical system, one of the costliest under the American flag, became overburdened and produced rotating power failures. Rain used to provide the water supply; now sources include desalination plants and water barged in from Puerto Rico. It is not enough.

Little of this affects the tourists, who numbered about 56,000 cruise ship passengers in 1960 but increased by 1980 to well over a million visitors stopping to spend a few hours in the bustling dutyfree shops around the **islands'** beaches.

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The growth and the crowding has put severe strains on the islands' services and on its psyche. "When you have Robinson Crusoe alone on an island, you have no problem," said Otis L. Felix, the Police Commissioner, a veteran of 26 years on the force.

When the population was smaller, he said, Virgin Islanders "were neighborly people, where I was your keeper and you were my people." He added, "People had a respect for law and order." Now Commissioner Felix has trouble getting cooperation from witnesses. And last December, for the first time in history, a policeman was attacked and killed while on a routine patrol.

After that shooting, a Federal court determined, the police beat a confession out of a suspect, Juan Francis, a member of the Rastafarian sect, and the Rastas taunted the funeral cortege.

The problem, Virgin Islanders say, is knowing just who the community is these days. "It's newcomers talking to newcomers," said Leslie Reovan, a sociologist at the College of the Virgin Islands. Natives of the islands, although they are the largest group, are outnumbered in their own land by the rich "continentals" from the mainland, who are driving up the price of real estate, and the poor "aliens" from the Caribbean, who want jobs, homes, schools and medical care.

Last fall, the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools notified the territory that Charlotte Amalie High School in St. Thomas and Central High School in St. Croix were in danger of losing their accreditation because of staff shortages, lack of supplies, termite damage, poor maintenance and poor attendance.

"We really need help," said Mrs. Enez Harvey, an aide to the Superintendent of Schools. "We really need some understanding." So many children are flowing into the schools from the Eastern Caribbean, including Haitians this year, that the school system conducts registration three times a year, she said.

As outsiders migrate to the islands, many young people leave to find jobs and opportunity. A high percentage enlists in the armed forces.

"The tragedy of the Virgin Islands is loss of its nationals, the youths who go away and don't come back," said Mr. Reovan. "It's this drifting situation that leads to a society's having no center and no future, and we keep incorporating more and more of the irrelevancies of continental politics into this place."

A particularly cruel "irrelevancy" has been the importation of American-style racism to islands in which native blacks tended to feel superior to the poorly educated white French immigrants.

Racial slurs that white Americans have applied to blacks are now used by blacks here to refer to the many American whites who have come from the Southern states since 1960 to work in the giant Hess Oil refinery on St. Croix. It is a self-contained community that mixes little, if at all, with the local population, and blacks here are not at all impressed.

"They come from Texas, Mississippi, Georgia, Florida," said Leona Watson, a black community activist in St. Croix who has been critical of Mr. Hess's operations. "They can't read or write, but they come down as bosses."

"They can't deal with a black person who is highly educated," she said, "but the shoe's on the other foot now. They're on our ground now."

"Last week, one of them said to seven or eight of our boys, 'I feel like getting a machine gun and mowing you all down,' and those were the most dangerous boys he could ever mess with. I told them to mark his face well and don't make someone else pay for his mistake."

She is equally upset about the black aliens who now have permanent resident status. "They're interested only in the U.S. dollar, not the land. They have their own homeland. They've improved their country. We have nowhere to run."

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Graphic

Illustrations: photo of condominiums on St. Croix photo of tourists on St. Croix photo of fast food sign on St. Croix

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