



It's almost time for "The Boat" to sail

Date December 12, 2003

It has evolved into one of the major social events of the Christmas season, but many of those who now eagerly anticipate attending the Banana Boat Reunion have no history of having ever danced to the music of Tony Seymour and the Nightbeaters at The Bahama Boat, a popular nightclub in the Oakes Field area in the 1960s and 1970s.

Members of the Banana Boat Reunion Committee are busy preparing for this year's event, which will be held at Worker's House on Saturday, Dec. 27, appropriately under the theme, "Back to the Sixties and Seventies," and participants are encouraged to dress in a style that was in vogue in that era. Businesswoman Pat Mortimer has been president of the committee for the past

five years, and in each of those years she has sought to introduce a different theme to reflect the time when The Boat was the a popular hangout for persons of her generation; days of innocence when it was still safe to walk the streets of New Providence en route home from The Boat at 2 o'clock in the morning and not be concerned at all about being assaulted or robbed at gunpoint.

Other members of the committee are Vera Chase, Cynthia Gibson, May Morton Curry, Barbara Sweeting, Anthony "Boozie" Rolle, Brian Gibson, Livingstone "Bones" Hepburn, Stephen "Garbo" Coakley, Garth "H.O." Nash, Earl Cash and Leo Dean. "Going to The Banana Boat was a must," Mortimer recalls. "That was the climax of your week. You had to go to The Boat, or your week was not complete."

It was nostalgic reflection of this nature that germinated the idea to hold a Banana boat Reunion. Vera Poitier Chase and her sister Cynthia Poitier Gibson, who lived on Hawkins Hill at the time, were frequent patrons of The Boat, and as Vera recalled in an interview several years ago, some of the best times she had in her life were "before I was married during the 60s when we all went to The Banana Boat."

Vera remembered making that statement to her hairdresser in about June of 1979, and it was suggested that she put her idea for a reunion of former regulars of The Boat on paper and form a committee to explore the possibility.

A committee was established, and at its first meeting, each member was asked to contribute \$20 as seed money and to each make up a list of 10 guests to be invited to participate. It was decided that each guest would be asked to contribute \$10 towards the cost of the function.

Finding a place to hold that first reunion was not difficult at all. Once the idea was mentioned to Garret "Tiger" Finlayson, who owned the Marlboro Arms and Lofthouse Club, he embraced it without

giving it a second thought.

Tiger had done very well for himself as a businessman, and he has increased his business empire tremendously since then, but he was once one of those for whom The Banana Boat became sort of a home away from home.

Tiger immediately offered the picturesque and romantic setting of the Lofthouse Club gardens, free of charge, to the committee for the first Banana Boat Reunion. It was an event that stands out as probably the best of the 22 that have been held so far, as some 200 or so former regulars of The Banana Boat got together in December of 1980 to once again dance to the music of that era. It was an all-you-can-eat, all-night affair, but more importantly, some old friends who had not seen each other in many, many years renewed acquaintances.

So successful was that first reunion that it was decided to hold another one around the same time the following year. Once again Tiger Finlayson offered the committee a place to hold it, free of charge. That second reunion was held at the Rebel Room, a popular nightclub which Tiger owned, and it too was a smashing success, as have all the others that have been held annually since then.

More likely than not, the late Edward "Teddy" Foster and Andrew Conliffe never envisaged that the building they were constructing on the corner of Crawford Street and Farrington Road in 1959 would be the catalyst for one of the major social events of the Christmas season in The Bahamas.

Sitting in their office in the Accounts Department of the Bahamas Telecommunications Corporation on East Street, the two budding entrepreneurs had their sights set more on establishing an elite club, where patrons could relax and enjoy themselves in sedate and pleasant surroundings. The name they chose for their tastefully decorated club was The Chantel Cocktail Lounge, but it never sparked any real interest among the nightclub-going crowd.

Teddy and Andrew eventually concluded that their plans for the club were not working out and decided to rent it out to Frank Minaya, a New Yorker who had visited The Bahamas as a tourist, fell in love with the place and decided to open a business here. Frank had acquired some experience in the nightclub business in New York, and in a very short period of time he turned the staid and dull Chantel into one of the most popular nightspots in town.

To accomplish this metamorphosis, he changed the club's name to The Banana Boat. Whenever The Boat sailed, as we used to say in those days, frequently on board were many individuals, men and women, who today are pillars of our society, professionally as well as socially.

Over the years the popularity of The Boat waned, as some of its regular patrons either went off to school or got married and became more family-oriented. However, many strong friendships were forged in The Boat, and each year around Christmas time these friends get together to reminisce about the good old days and party all night at the Banana Boat Reunion.