

October 24, 2004-----

KEY LARGO, Fla. -- You know you've come across the right establishment when the owner is busy swimming in Blackwater Sound, a few mangroves away from the Florida Bay. I've been visiting the Caribbean Club on U.S. 1 in Key Largo for more than 20 years, but I never introduced myself to the bar's longtime owner, Robby Whitehurst.

A few weeks ago I walked into the historic roadhouse where ambient scenes of "Key Largo" were filmed. I found Whitehurst, 52, bobbing up and down in the salty sound like a happy buoy. His girlfriend, Renee Bentley, was hanging on his back. It was 3 o'clock on a Monday afternoon. What are you doing at 3 o'clock on a Monday afternoon?

This is what it is for Whitehurst and what it always will be.

Whitehurst's father, Lefty, was a carpenter around Key Largo in the early 1960s. He loved the roadside bar so much he bought it with his wife, Ruth. Whitehurst has run the club since the early '70s with his sisters Kathy and Kristy. Their father died in 1968.

The Caribbean Club was built in 1938 by Carl Fisher, the brains behind the Dixie Highway, Miami Beach and Atlantic City. The Caribbean Club was his final project. It was supposed to be a private fishing club as Fisher envisioned Key Largo as another Miami Beach. The original property included the bar, a kitchen and a small hotel. After Fisher died in 1939 of a gastric hemorrhage, the Caribbean Club became a gambling establishment.

A couple of yellow-tinged Miami press clippings hang on the tavern's walls. One from March 1955 reads in part: "A woman was burned to death and two men were seriously injured today as fire swept the famed Caribbean Club in Key Largo following an all-night drinking bout there... . Up until 1948 it was a gambling hideaway in the Keys, again catering to the wealthy yacht set. Just before the Krones purchased the club in 1948, actress Lauren Bacall and husband Humphrey Bogart stayed at the Caribbean during the filming of 'Key Largo.' "

Director John Huston put the Caribbean Club on the map when he filmed backdrops of his 1948 classic "Key Largo" here. "A guy named Ziggy ran the place then," Whitehurst says after drying off from his swim. "It is now Ziggy's Crabhouse down there (mile marker 84 on the bay side). Used to be Ziggy's Conch. Anyway, Huston had such a good time he named one of the gangsters in the movie Ziggy (Marc Lawrence). The dock scenes were shot out by our point. They sent air boats up on scaffolding and blew the water around like it was a hurricane."

The film's plot spins around a returning war veteran (Bogart) who visits a friend's hotel to find a gangster (Edward G. Robinson) in charge. As a hurricane approaches, the two confront each other. Most of "Key Largo" was shot in Southern California. Another Bogart connection exists down the road. The original steam-powered vessel used in "The African Queen" is on view at the Holiday Inn Key Largo Marina, mile marker 100 oceanside (305-451-4655).

Whitehurst did score a bit role as a dancer in "Blood and Wine," filmed at the Caribbean Club in 1997. Jack Nicholson, Michael Caine and Judy Davis were shot at the club in the film noir about a bottomed-out wine merchant (Nicholson) who is planning a jewelry heist. "Nicholson was fun and polite," Whitehurst says. "But not very talkative. His chauffeur would bring him in, he would do his scene and leave."

The Caribbean Club is always my first stop when leaving Miami. Key Largo is about an 80-minute drive from Miami International Airport. When I arrive at the Caribbean Club, I take a cold bottle of beer out to the backyard pier, sit down and reflect on where I've been and where I'm going. I look straight ahead toward the calm Florida Bay and then turn north to see people checking out the Waverunner shop along the coral reef next door.

Inside the nondescript "lounge" there's a CD jukebox with Dickey Betts' "Great Southern," Jimmy Buffett's "License to Chill," The Mavericks' "Music For All Occasions" and many others. Back in the day, I used to hit the Caribbean Club on a Friday night to catch the bikers and Southern rock bands that packed the joint. In recent years traffic out of Miami has been so bad, I head to the Keys on a Wednesday or Thursday. And I'm still amused with the club's bathroom signs that say INBOARDS (for women) and OUTBOARDS (for men.) The more clubbers drink the more confused they become.

"In the '60s, this was like a deserted island," Whitehurst says. "Lots of mosquitoes. No television. AC was just coming out. Now the whole town is modern days with convenient stores. Everybody that moves down here wants to be the last one."

This fall is a good time to visit the Caribbean Club and the Keys. The annual Key Largo Cookoff, featuring nearly 100 restaurants from the upper Keys, will be held Nov. 4 at the Sheraton Key Largo Resort. "February and March slam (with tourists) until Easter," Whitehurst says. "The best week is probably between Christmas and New Year's. It slows down a bit in January. But the summer is good too. The weather is great here in the summer."

Over the last couple of years, Whitehurst has been installing historical relics in the Caribbean Club's sloping backyard. An original marker from the Flagler Railroad sits near a rugged beach. The train line linked Miami to Key West and was blown away when the 1935 Labor Day hurricane swept through the Keys. Friends Gene and Janet Robenson gave the concrete marker to Whitehurst. One corner of the

white marker says 102. Another corner says 420. Whitehurst looks at the marker and says, "Key West was 102 miles away and it was 420 miles to Jacksonville. The railroad ran along the coast here. When I was a kid, we used to see the railroad tracks. We also have a cannon from the Spanish when they came and killed all the Indians to take all the gold." His voice drifts off as he adds, "Rather ruthless."

Spanish settlers of the 1730s named "Key Largo" for the longest Key. Key Largo is 37 miles long and consists of 22,000 acres. According to Keys historian Jerry Wilkinson, the next largest island is Big Pine Key, consisting of 5,800 acres. Key Largo is bordered on the west by Florida Bay and the Everglades and on the distant east by the Atlantic Ocean.

The tavern's Hollywood history is anchored in hurricane lore, and indeed, the Caribbean Club survived Hurricanes Ivan, Frances, Jeanne and, especially, Charley, the storm that came closest to the Keys. "We were always on standby but never felt threatened," Whitehurst says. "Billy Wagner (senior director of Monroe County Emergency Management) was pulling the trigger a little early, telling people a week before the hurricane not to come down, to get out of town. Then the hurricane doesn't even come close. It does a lot to the economy, especially at this time of year. We were quarantined for a month. It puts a damper on everybody. Three out of four weeks we had a storm. Everything around town except the gas stations were closed. We were the only place with a television. We stayed here."

Farther north, the Florida agriculture department estimated the storms, excluding Ivan, will cost the commercial fishing industry \$4 million to \$5 million. The commercial fishing industry accounts for \$171 million a year. "Actually, we were just talking how the wind and storms were perfect for us," Whitehurst says. "Because it blew up the water enough to get lobster moving from the deep water by the Bahamas and the lower Keys into the upper Keys. It wasn't hard enough to damage the traps. So lobstermen are having the best year they've had in five years. One of the guys from here got 700 pounds yesterday in one pull. But there hasn't been anybody (tourists) to eat them, so I guess they're exporting."

Barnacle Bill is hanging around the bar as I talk to Whitehurst. Barnacle Bill is an area fisherman who won the annual Walker's Cay shootout in the Bahamas by catching a world record 800-pound marlin. Barnacle Bill's picture with the marlin hangs on a post across the dance floor from the small stage.

That's the great thing about the Caribbean Club.

You never know what crazy conch you will run into.

Norm Higgins is a former Chicagoan working the Caribbean Club as if he is a Chicago alderman. Higgins, 55, is dropping off Democratic campaign posters on a sluggish Monday afternoon. Higgins is a 1967 graduate of St. Rita High School, a classmate of former White Sox pitcher and current broadcaster Ed Farmer. Higgins

grew up in the Back of the Yards and his father was a Chicago cop. Higgins has lived in Key Largo since 1976. A former construction worker who helped rebuild McCormick Place, he is now a Key Largo locksmith. "My business dropped 80 percent during the hurricanes," he says. "The place was like a ghost town. So we just hung out here and had our 'Hurricane Party'."

This is a tidbit to file away. The recent National Geographic documentary "Hurricane Summer" says that a rise in temperature in the Atlantic has triggered a long cycle of hurricane activity that will hit Florida for years to come. The Caribbean Club will withstand the hit. The club is a rock in the world of coral reef.