

Capturing Giant Turtles in the Caribbean

BY DAVID D. DUNCAN*

With Illustrations from Photographs by the Author

"BIG FELLOWS, aren't they?" I began, speaking to a heavy-set stranger smoking on the wharf at Key West, Florida. Slowly he removed his pipe.

"Chickens," he replied, without taking his eyes from the churning water below.

"You think those are fairly sizable turtles down there?" he chuckled. I admitted I did.

"Well, in the deep-sea turtle trade we call those young'uns 'chickens.' Don't get to be turtles until they weigh over a hundred and twenty-five pounds. Why, they're just babies. Come on over to the next kraal and see the really big ones" (page 186).

One look and I was convinced. There, leisurely swimming through the enclosed waters, were the largest turtles I had ever seen.

Turtles That Are Turtles

"Four feet across and weighing up to four hundred pounds, sometimes even more," was his answer to my question. "Vegetarians, feed on eelgrass, catch 'em off Nicaragua, use nets to . . . say, my name's Ebanks, Capt. Allie Ebanks, master of the schooner *Adams* that brings 'em in. Come on down to the vessel. I'll show you the whole outfit."

Luck was with me, for here was a man who could tell me the full story of the little-known turtle fleet. It was the theme of his own life. Little did I realize while hastening down the water front that this was the opening of a great adventure.

"These are what we catch 'em in—all handwoven by my crew," continued Captain Allie, as he unfolded a heavy net upon the deck. "Y' know," said the friendly skipper as my tour of inspection ended, "y've seen the turtles, tested our nets, met my crew, and walked the deck of the finest schooner in the islands. Why don't you come with us when we sail tomorrow? See the whole thing for yourself."

"Nothing could be better," I replied.

"But don't for a minute think it'll be an easy voyage," he cautioned. "We'll be sailing into dangerous waters, the sea'll try to spit us out, and the wind'll hurl us back. The food's the same seven days a week, and we won't be back for two months. But, so far as I know, the story has never been told, and you'll be the first writing person to sail with us to the Mosquito Coast. Do you want to go?"

"When do we sail?" I shouted, then rowed the little tender nearly out of the water in my haste to get ashore. Cameras and clothes collected, I reboarded the *Adams*.

We sailed around Cuba, touched briefly at the men's home port in the Cayman Islands, and then anchored alongside the fleet, nestling in the lee of Mosquito Cays. Here, 30 miles off the northeastern shore of Nicaragua, we had reached the headquarters for turtling operations on the east coast of Central America. On this tiny, palm-crested island, scarcely more than a mangrove swamp, crews find one of the few sources of fresh water within easy reach of the turtling grounds.

While seamen from other schooners came aboard to help refill our water tanks, letters from home and news from the States were exchanged for information about the latest activities on the reefs. As I quietly listened, I learned much about the fishermen, their families, and the turtles.

Cayman islanders are British subjects, hard-bodied but soft-spoken, seldom at home yet devoted to their families. They combine several schooners, a handful of men, and the lore derived from generations in the pursuit of the king of the Mosquito Coast. From grandfather, to father, to son, only the men and their vessels change. After 150 years the method of fishing remains much the same, and turtles, seemingly, are just as numerous.

Even in the days of the Conquistadores, the green turtles were prized for the savory steaks and broths which stimulated jaded tastes of the Spanish warriors. According to legend, lost buccaneers were sometimes guided through the night by following the explosive breathing of the broad-backed leviathans, swimming in quest of sandy beaches on which to lay their eggs.

Today the search for turtles has slackened, for many Cayman schooners and seamen are helping the British Navy.

Grass to Suit Mr. Turtle's Taste

Home port of the trim schooners of the turtle fleet is Georgetown, Grand Cayman, British West Indies. Though wandering yachtsmen have come to Cayman from far corners of the world, the story of the fertile islands, incomparable beaches, and hospitable

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"Fire Away!" Captain Shouts, and over the Side Go Sinker and Float

Attached to a 60-foot line, the stone will anchor corkwood over a turtle lair. At evening the fishermen will return to spread nets. In the gloom, their quarry is less likely to detect the trap (page 188).

inhabitants is still a virtually unwritten chapter in the travel annals of the Caribbean. The narrative of the turtle trade itself could be woven into a fascinating modern romance of the sea.

"Competition?" mused Henry, the first mate, as we lay stretched on the afterdeck of the schooner while trolling heavily baited lines over the stern. "No, ours is the only big-scale commercial turtle fleet in Central American waters. It's mighty strange, too, but there's the reason for it right there." His rope-calloused finger pointed to a floating line of grasslike weed sliding past our stern.

"Eelgrass—some folks call it turtle grass—the commonest thing in the water, and the cussedest," and he brought in his line, hand over hand, to remove several of the tough, greenish, ticker-tape strands from his hook.

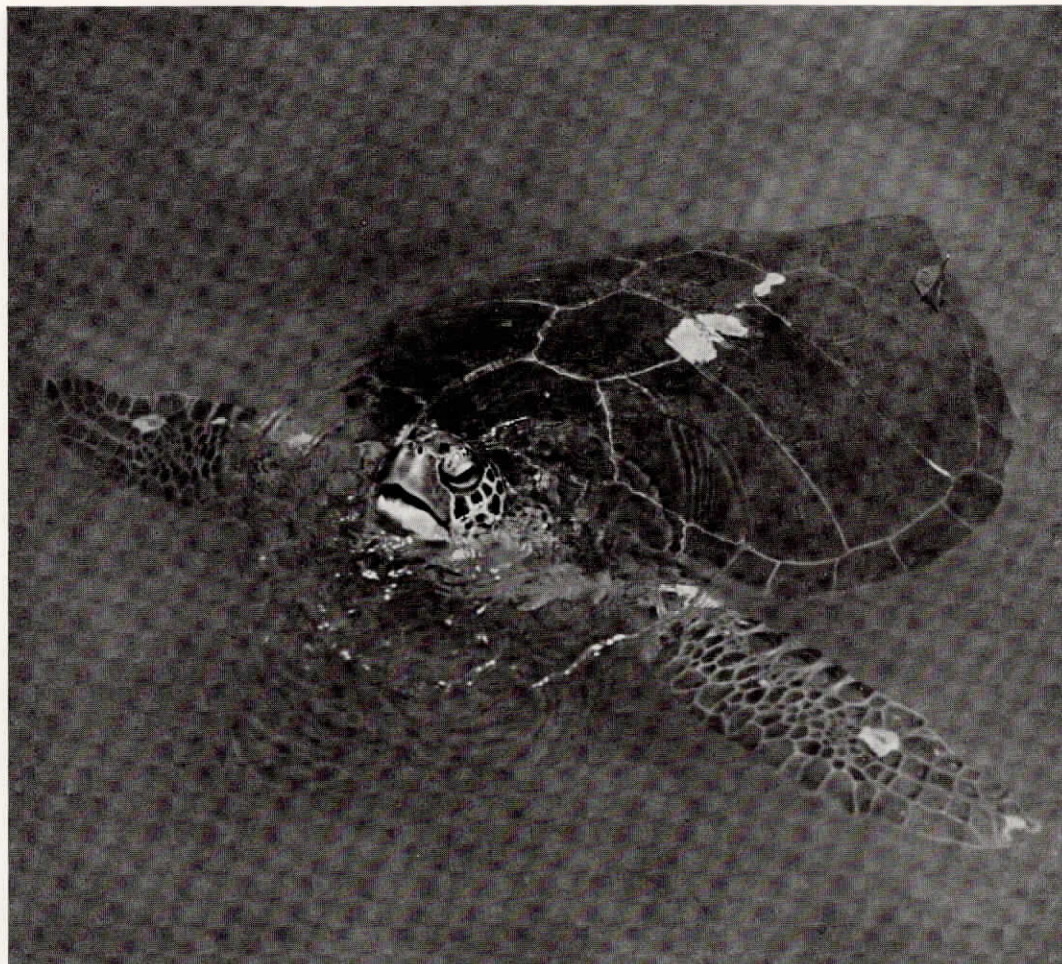
Eelgrass, he explained, grows in many

places, but Henry insisted that the Mosquito Cay variety was "special," and that only the turtles which feed on it yield savory soup, steaks, or chowder. Flesh of turtles feeding on other eelgrass acquires too strong a taste, he said.

"Guess that's why my daddy, his daddy, and his daddy's daddy all turtled right here on the coast, hating and cussing it when here, but missing and loving it when away, because it gave 'em their living, protected their homes, and made proud, seafaring men of their sons."

Henry had no scientific proof to back up his theory, but it was evident that every man in the fleet believed his story, long a tradition with Cayman Island turtle fishers.

The conversation was interrupted when Henry suddenly jumped to his feet, trying to brake the wildly racing line as it tore through his fingers. Far astern, our bubbling wake



Up for a Breather and Look-around, a Goggle-eyed Turtle Spreads Its Flippers and Blows

Surfacing for air about every 45 minutes, the giants tangle with nets spread over their sleeping grounds. After the mating season, females lay eggs on warm beaches. The males, having little curiosity about land, seldom venture out of water (page 184).

exploded. A surprised barracuda leaped high in the air, in a determined effort to throw the glittering bait and hook.

"'Cuda," muttered Renee, the helmsman, as the knifing fish flashed into the air again, this time nearer the vessel. He joined the mate, and the two fought the plungings of the fish and the speed of the vessel in a tug-o'-war which threatened the doubled line.

Unexpected Ducking Rewards Hecklers

Shouts of encouragement and advice rang out from all over the ship, as everyone cherished visions of a change from our three-times-a-day menu of salt turtle. Captain Allie, far above decks in the lookout, bellowed like a wounded bull each time the fish threatened to escape. Out on the bowsprit, two members of the crew began a barrage of good-natured

heckling, which ended in a muffled sputter as the bow disappeared in a comber. When the spray cleared, two drenched, mouselike creatures were revealed, clinging to the rigging. The battle continued without their aid. Cooky, after whetting his knife, stood by in experienced silence.

After a couple of more arm-jarring runs, the barracuda was brought alongside. The men yanked the fish on deck, and Cooky went to work with his knife, reducing the silvery, streamlined fighter to portions just the size of his skillet. After supper that evening I sprawled in my bunk, stuffed to the brim with golden fillets, coconut bread, and steaming, gravy-laden rice. For once I had proved to my complete satisfaction that the barracuda was a worthy food fish.

My meditation on the error of scorning the



Members of the *Adams* Crew Wistfully Watch a Companion Sail for Home

A schooner, going back for supplies, quits the Mosquito Coast for the Cayman Islands. Left behind, three idle mariners fasten envious eyes on the lucky ship. Having been away from home for months, they are weary of the sea.

barracuda was cut short as Renee, relieved of the wheel, dropped down on the bunk beside me. Like every other man aboard, he was anxious that I profit by his knowledge of turtle fishing.

"Mate has told you about their feeding on eelgrass, and you've seen how the grass grows in the shallows all along the coast. But there's more to it than that." He paused to light his carefully rolled cigarette.

"You see," he resumed, "the turtle spends the entire day in these shallow meadows feeding on grasses. He only stops eating to swim up to the surface to breathe, or to hide on the bottom from a cruising shark. Then, as soon as dusk begins to fall, the turtle leaves this submarine meadow for deeper water, where it spends the night holding fast to a bottom rock.

"Seems kind of funny, doesn't it, the way old Brother Turtle feeds in the same shallows, swims through the same channels, and even spends each night wrapped around the very same rock? And that's just why we can catch him."

Next morning I awoke to find the schooner under full sail, heading into the rising sun. By noon all hands were ready for the turtle hunt. High on the foremast, Captain Allie surveyed the water and shouted instructions to the helmsman below as the schooner pushed through the breaking reefs.

Floats Mark Turtle Lairs

The mates were alert and watching for coral heads, far beneath the surface, which might harbor turtles. On the deck a seaman stood ready on each side of the vessel. At a command, one would toss overboard a cork-wood float, attached with 60 feet of line to a heavy weight. After several hours of work, ninety floats dotted the ocean, marking sites where nets would be placed and, it was hoped, turtles might be caught (page 178).

Reduced to writing, the work seems simple. In reality, it appeared miraculous that a 100-foot vessel, crowded with canvas and wholly dependent on the wind, could be maneuvered so handily among the jagged reefs.

Many times the captain waited so long to tack that the shadow of the mainsail fell across the rocks themselves. The schooner pulled away at the last possible moment, leaving only a foaming wake to splash upon the reefs.

When the vessel anchored in the lee of the reefs that afternoon, three small boats were put overside for the return to the floating markers. Captain Allie, Henry, and Albert, the second mate, each accompanied by two



Where the Turtle Fleets Roam

Three seldom-visited dots in the Caribbean are the Cayman Islands, a dependency of British-owned Jamaica. From these isles sail men who trap the green turtle. At Mosquito Cays they lodge captives temporarily. Holds full, their schooners deliver live cargoes to Key West. A tribe of Indians, not insects, gave its name to Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast.

of the crew, manned the dugouts, as turtlers call their neat little craft. I went along with the skipper. Only Cooky remained on board.

"Now you'll see what I meant last night," reminded Renee, leaning over the tiller of the captain's dugout as we plowed along.

How Turtles Are Trapped

"Turtling is just like any other kind of trapping," cut in Captain Allie, taking the helm while Renee and the second seaman made ready the nets. "Catching turtles is just like catching otters or foxes, or other smart animals. You have to place your nets just like traps, in such a way that everything looks natural and nice until the turtle comes along."



Navigating Is Father-and-Son Teamwork on the *Adams*

Outward bound from Key West, Captain Allie Ebanks shoots the sun with his sextant while Junior keeps the ship on course. The helmsman starts his career young. It's an old Cayman Islands custom, one that produces fine seamen and generations of captains.

We arrived at the markers just before sundown. With sail furled, the dugout was rowed from one marker to the next, and the full technique developed.

As each float was approached, a seaman fastened one end of a turtle net to it. Then the oarsmen pulled away hard until the net lay stretched horizontally upon the water, covering an area approximately 60 feet long by 10 feet wide. A second anchored float was tied to the other end, and the net lay ready for Brother Turtle's arrival. As the captain stood in the stern of the dugout, spreading net after net in our wake, he alternated commands to his men with brief bits of information.

"We come out to the reefs at this time of evening," he told me, "because a turtle can see like a hawk in the daylight. And shy! Why, never in all your life have you seen a more timid thing. That's why we have to put out our nets near nightfall, so's when he comes home after feeding all day, he can't see it floating over his favorite rock."

During the night the turtle rises to the surface for air. This is the big moment. If the net has been laid just right, he rises directly beneath it, puts his head or a flipper through the mesh, gets excited, flounces, and is trapped. The creature becomes so tangled up that it can't move, and the anchors hold the net in place until the seamen reach the spot the next morning.

With all nets in place and explanations over, the men returned to the mother ship to the supper which Cooky had laid out upon the low cabin-house roof. After the meal, the same comfortable roof served as a couch for

the islanders, while they listened to the captain's plans for the morrow and debated the probable catch in each net. Before long, deep, measured breathing sounded from arm-pillowed heads.

Beating Early-rising Sharks to the Nets

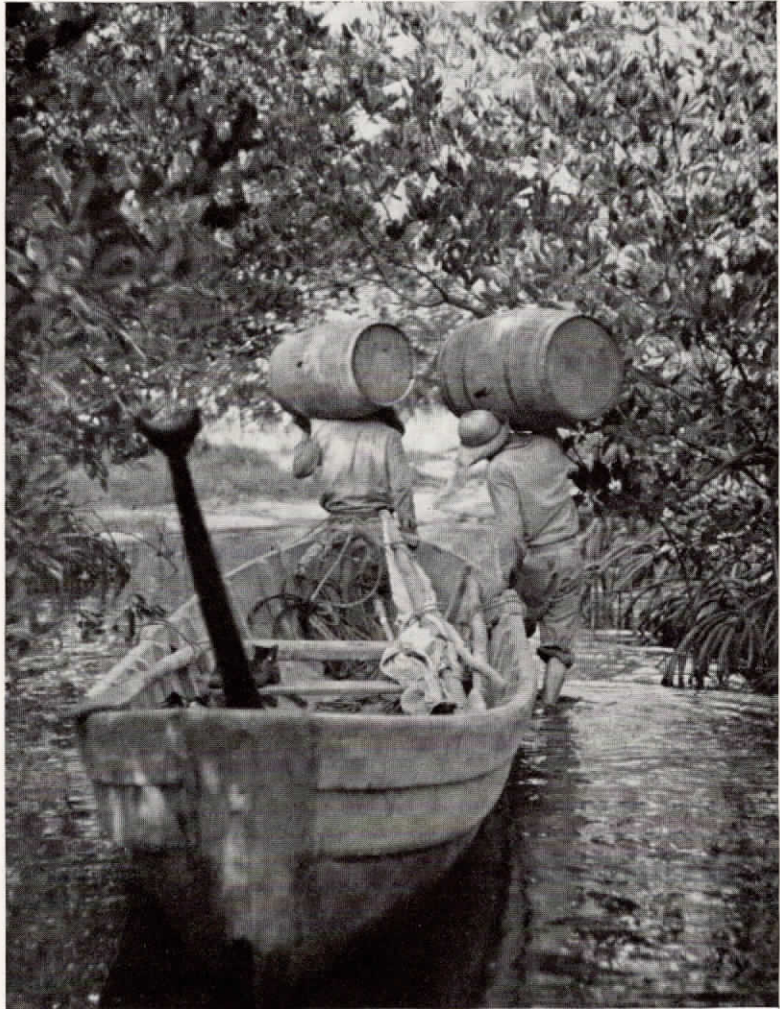
Dawn found all three dugouts well out toward the nets, for the men hurried to remove ensnared turtles before early-marauding sharks might find the catch. By sunup most of the nets had been taken in. Some were untouched and empty, others completely snarled by flailing turtles. Of the thirty nets set by each boat, a catch of five turtles per dugout was considered good luck.

Some of the nets were difficult to locate, having been pulled down into the snags of the coral reefs by escaping creatures. Other nets were found with gaping holes, minus the catch—evidence of attacks by sharks. Still others were never seen again. They had been towed away by some powerful denizen of the depths. With all of these obstacles at work and sometimes with a gale blowing for long periods, it seemed lucky when a dugout returned with several huge turtles as the day's catch.

Even on a smooth sea, extracting the turtles from the nets is dangerous. Although these men have been trained to the work from early boyhood, the turtles' beaklike jaws and bone-crushing flippers are constant sources of peril. The green turtles are not vicious, but as they are taken from the water they become excited, lashing wildly with their flippers and snapping their huge jaws with a menacing clang (page 187).

Finding one snarled in a net, the men row their dugout alongside the tangle, which floats on the surface. One stands by the oars as the other two attempt to grasp the captive under the collarlike shell. Then, as the wildly thrashing turtle is brought nearer the boat, each man tries to catch a front flipper so that together they may pull the brute over the gunwale. Maintaining a grip on a flipper is more than most men can do, but to lift the four hundred pounds of frantically fighting turtle over the side is herculean. Once in the boat, the turtle, strangely enough, subsides into a lethargic stupor and remains so on the ride back to the schooner.

As a dugout pulls alongside the mother ship, a cable ending in double nooses is low-



Fishermen Wade a Pirate Trail to Fresh-water Wells

Buccaneers discovered Mosquito Cays' springs in a mangrove swamp centuries ago. For the last 150 years turtlers have used them. They are a seaman's oasis in a salt-water desert (page 177).

ered. A seaman places a loop around each front flipper of a turtle, and the big fellow is swung aboard.

Captain Allie Carves Initials on His Quarry

Once over the side, ceremonies are brief. The captain, with a razor-sharp knife, cuts the initials of the vessel on the bottom plate of the turtle. This serves as a brand to distinguish the giants caught by each schooner of the fleet. The brands simplify distribution of the receipts, after the catch has been marketed in Key West (pages 186, 187).

Lifted from the deck, the turtle descends through a hatch into the hold. Nooses removed, the captive is rolled over on its back and a block of wood shoved under its head



Seen against the Sail, a Shadowy Phantom with Pinocchio Nose Climbs the Ratlines

for a cushion. Peering into the semi-gloom below, I could see the whole turtle cargo resting quietly in this same upside-down position.

Warm Sand Incubates Eggs

Mother turtles scoop out holes in the sand and lay their eggs—sometimes three hundred in one nest. Then, after pushing the sand back to cover them, they waddle slowly again to the water and leave the eggs to their fate. Jaguars often visit the beaches to eat the eggs.

When the tiny turtles hatch, they poke through the sand and begin to wobble on unsteady legs toward the water. Many are eaten by gulls and other predatory birds before they reach the comparative safety of the waves, but some escape. Once in the water,

they grow rapidly in size, and protective shells form on their backs. As time passes, these shells become harder, thicker, and heavier, but the plates on their bellies remain leathery and soft.

Captured Turtles Must Lie Upside Down

"Naturally, then," said Cooky, "if we take a turtle out of the water and put him on his belly, the soft bottom shell will push against his lungs, so he can't breathe, and he's going to die. But, way back, somebody figured that if a turtle were put on his back, he would keep right on breathing. So that's why we carry 'em the same way, too."

It was true, for in that position the turtle can breathe with perfect ease, seemingly unperturbed in a strangely rolling and pitching world. Often the whisper of the brutes' breathing swelled into an asthmatic chorus, as each new arrival was welcomed.

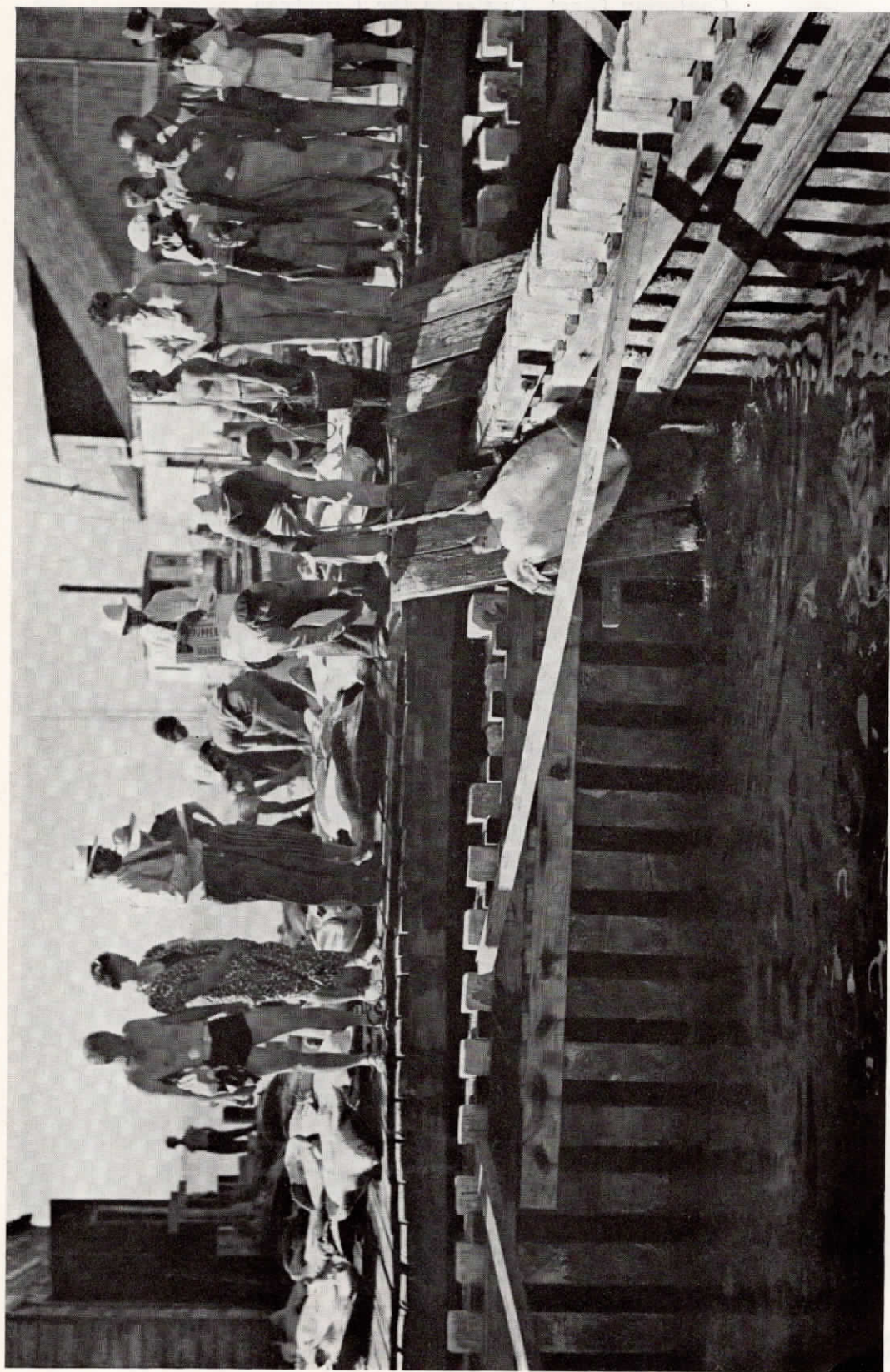
While the cargo grew, days passed into weeks, and weeks became months, until at last the combined catch of all the schooners warranted a trip to Key West. And none too soon, for cloudy puffballs scudding across the skies gave warning of the approaching hurricane season.

Nets were placed nearer, so that crews might go rapidly aboard and the schooner sail out to deep water in case of a sudden storm. All running gear was kept clear, and the mainsail remained towering and vigilant through the nights. The watches, discontinued upon arrival at the turtle grounds, were resumed so that neither rising wind nor falling barometer might escape notice. Relief was felt when the order finally came to weigh anchor, hoist sail, and lay a course to Mosquito Cays.



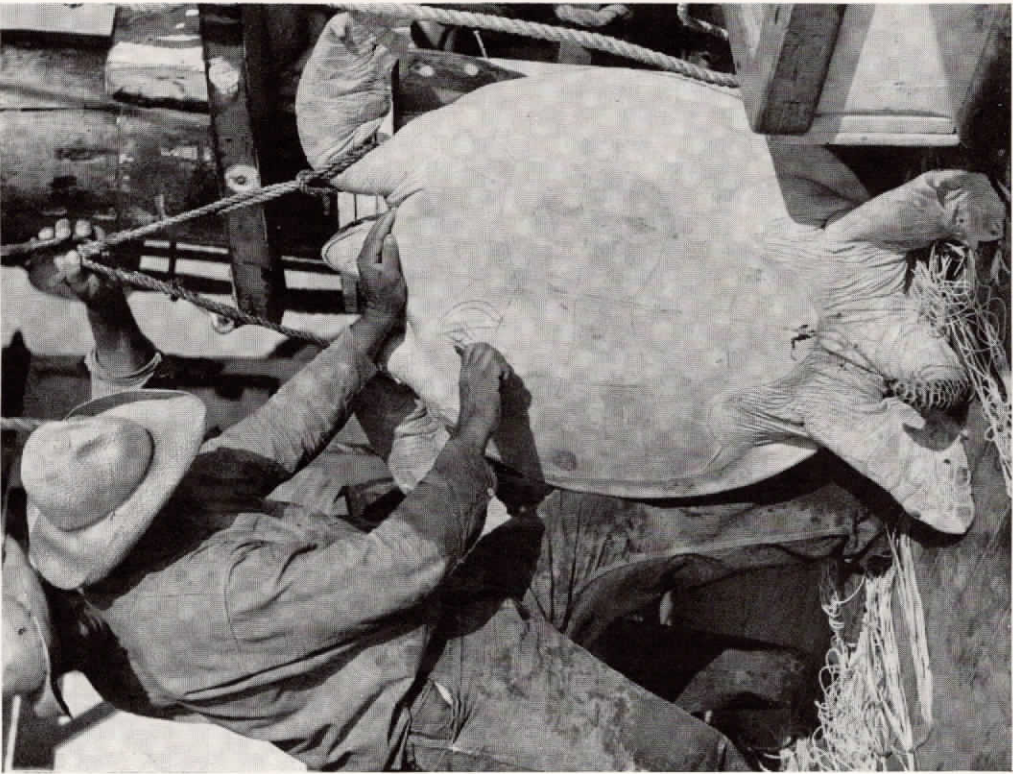
Belly Side Up, These Passengers Have "Turned Turtle"

Sea turtles' backs are well armored; their stomachs are lightly covered. Therefore, they are turned top side down lest the tremendous weight stave in lungs and cause death. Fresh from nets, they go aboard the schooner on ropes noosed around flippers (page 183).



Unloaded from the Schooner, a Sea Monster Slides down the Chute into a Fattening Pen in Key West

Vegetarians by preference, turtles destined for the soup kettle undergo a change of diet here. Henceforth they eat fish and meat scraps, and make no protest. The scorekeeper with notebook checks off initials on the turtles' belly plates and credits their owners (page 183).



With Painless Carving, the Skipper Brands His Catch
Cutting "Ad" for *Adams* on the turtle's leathery belly plate, the captain distinguishes his catch from that of other schooners. At Key West fattening pens the brand will identify his "herd" (opposite page).



Look Out for Those Flippers, Boys!

Turtlers pull a net-entangled giant into the boat after a terrific struggle. Once aboard, he will subside (page 183). At 150 pounds, turtles are tender; at 400 pounds, they are better for soup.



Arriving at the Corkwood Markers at Dusk, the Captain Sets a Turtle Trap

A net woven of 85-pound test line is spread over the surface. Tied to anchored floats, it is stretched taut as the oarsmen pull away. Night hours are trapping time, for "a turtle can see like a hawk in the day" (pages 178 and 182).

Our return to the cay was unlike any other during the months spent off Nicaragua. Previously, each Saturday we had returned to release the week's catch of turtles into the kraals, stockadeliike enclosures scattered through the shallow lagoons. These enclosures are bamboo poles, sunk in about five feet of water. Here the turtles are kept well fed while waiting for shipment day. The procedure seemed similar to the cattle roundups so familiar on the great ranches of the Western States.

From Saturday evening until Monday morning, the turtle fleet rode at anchor while the crews swapped yarns and enjoyed a well-earned rest.

Thrills Mark a Turtle Rodeo

This time, however, all ideas of rest were forgotten in the swirl of activity around the kraals. Excitement ran high as the islanders, barehanded, caught the wildly swimming turtles in the kraals. While two men shouted encouragement from a dugout alongside, a third waded neck-deep in the water. Arms and legs outstretched, he moved gingerly along, apparently only roiling the muddy bottom with his toes. Then suddenly he lunged

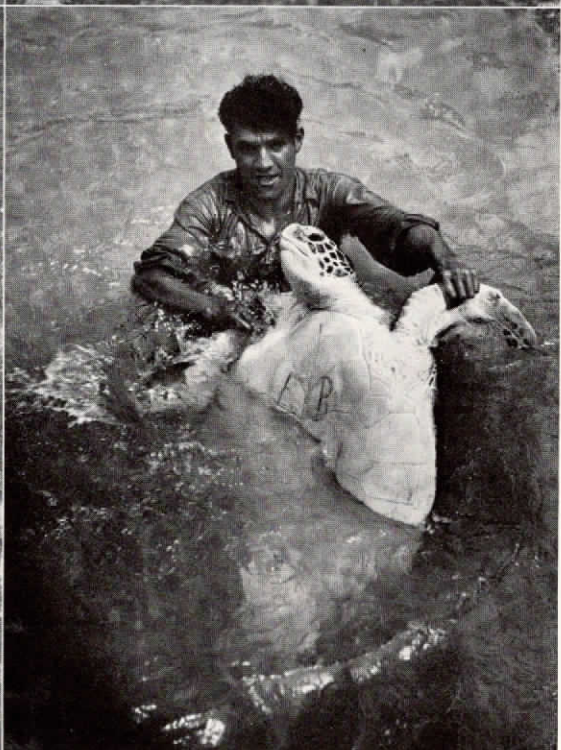
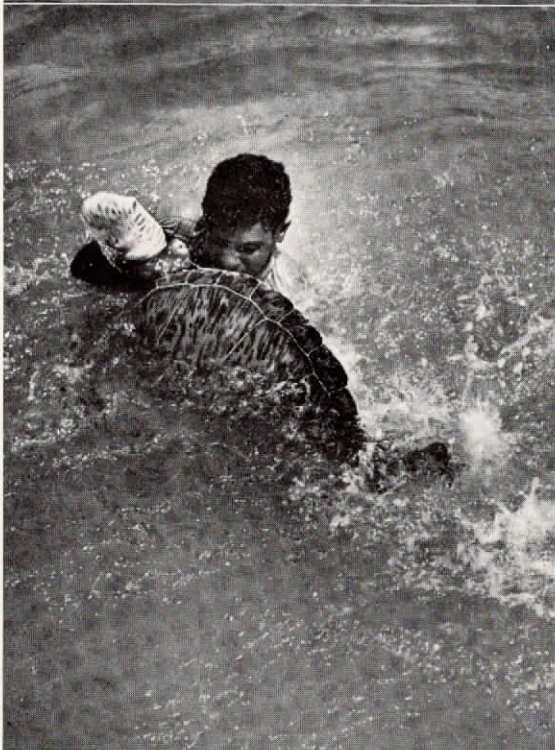
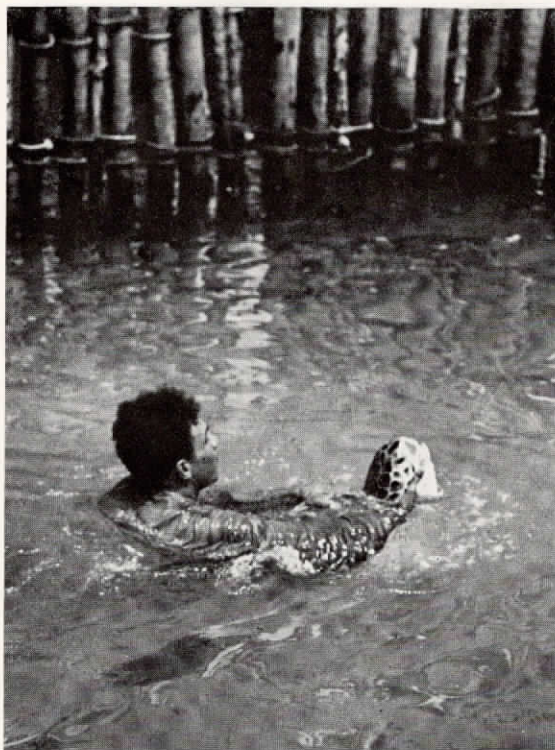
and disappeared. Spray flew and bedlam broke loose (opposite page).

Riding a "Bucking" Turtle

Foam boiled up and whirlpools sucked at the surface. Then the water erupted to eject our friend, clinging for dear life to the back of a turtle. Gleeful shouts mingled with the spray while the other hundred-odd turtles in the kraal went crazy. From one side to the other, in the water and then out, the boy rode his rocketing steed.

Working one hand up under its throat and pressing against the broad shell with his knees, the boy steered his charger straight into the side of the kraal where his friends were stationed. Powerful hands grabbed its flippers; the boy pushed, they pulled; and presto, out of the water into the dugout went the turtle. Not a dry stitch of clothing could be found in the crowd. As the boy climbed out of the water, one of his companions jumped in. Then, to the tune of shouting men and gasping turtles the second round of an amazing rodeo swung into action.

Normal tranquillity of Mosquito Cays was shattered that evening as men continued to work in the kraals by lantern light and the



Ride 'em, Turtler! A Cayman Islander Subdues a Bucking Steed at Roundup Time

Pole-enclosed kraal (or crawl) is this aquatic rodeo's corral. First the youth works a hand under the turtle's toothless jaw (upper left). Spray flies as the reptile, snorting and pawing, tries to unhorse him. Below, the rider applies the strangle hold. At last he secures the front flippers and his antagonist is powerless (opposite page).



Spray Blots Out the Sky as the Angry Caribbean Drenches the *Adams*, Homeward Bound Heading north from Mosquito Cays with 100,000 pounds of live turtles, the schooner races the storm to Key West. The hurricane season approaches (page 184).

final boatloads of turtles were taken aboard the schooner. Upside-down turtles overflowed the dunnage, filled the hold, covered the decks, and finally the last few even found their way to a resting place under the cabin floor. Noah may have had a more cosmopolitan passenger list, but surely he would have been hard pressed to find one more novel.

Next morning I once again awoke to discover Mosquito Cays far astern, but this time the vessel was pointing due north. The turtles were on their way to Key West and from

thence to pantry shelves all over the world. I was going home with the story and photographs of a thrilling adventure.

The final days of the voyage roared away with a wind that threw mountainous seas across our bow. Yet the schooner plunged on, dropping Nicaragua, Honduras, British Honduras, the Yucatán Peninsula, and finally Cuba slowly in her wake. At last the game little craft sailed serenely into the port of Key West, to mark the end of another trip to the Mosquito Coast.

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