

“How Pitcairners’ Resourcefulness Has Enabled Them to Survive in Isolation”

A talk given by Kari Boye Young at Bounty-Pitcairn Conference 2012
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(I will quote Andrew Young and Maynard Warren from recordings I made thirty years ago, plus Herb Ford’s *Pitcairn: Port of Call* and papers provided by Polly Ernst.)

When I came to Pitcairn in 1973, and even more so when I married and settled in 1978, I realized I didn’t bring many skills to the island. There was no use for an academic on Pitcairn. In order to survive I had to learn to plant and weed gardens, climb hills and cliffs, go fishing, make carvings, bake bread, to make do and to live without, - I had a lot to learn from the islanders.

Just *because* of their physical isolation, the islanders turned into extremely resourceful people, well suited for their kind of life in the middle of nowhere. They are a people of action, of innovation, self-reliance and stubbornness, known as jacks of all trades, handy with tools, with engines, generators, fishing lines – they can fix just about anything, at least temporarily, till the next ship arrives with spare parts. The way they organized and ran their small community made it survive over 200 years, thanks to their own ingenuity. Could it have survived if it had been a dysfunctional community, as some claimed it was?

Charles Chauvel wrote after his visit in 1932: *“Their government and social troubles, their sufferings, their fights, their calamities, their deaths – not an echo of these is ever heard by the outside world. Necessity has taught Pitcairn to live unto itself, to govern itself and to amuse itself.”*

Chauvel had no idea how true on every level those words were, nor of the devastation this state of affairs would eventually lead to, and how we 80 years after, still “live unto” ourselves because of the isolation and lack of outside stimulus.

In 1937 a report says that *“there is no form of leisure by day and no amusement by night on Pitcairn Island. Apparently books are seldom read.”* How could such a community sustain itself?

EDUCATION

Initially Pitcairners loved to read. Captain King said in 1819 *“nothing pleased them as well as the books – as they wished much to read and write”*. Adams himself was aware of his academic shortcomings, and welcomed John Buffett, when he jumped ship in 1823 to be their teacher. Yet they could not write, even in 1835 they signed with their marks.

Teraura told that her husband Edward Young used to read to her and Isaac Martin from the Bible and other books. Martin missed the stimulation of the outside world, and it is still like that on Pitcairn, monotony and the isolation from outside ideas, opinions and plain *news* could crush your mind if you don’t activate it in a positive

way. Already in 1815 Captain Pipon said: *“In this little retreat there is not much variety, and the description of one day’s occupation serves equally for its successor.”* A sobering statement.

Reports in 1897 revealed that the islanders “were worse off than ever”, with little clothes and supplies, with declining morals and a host of illegitimate children. There was little interest in books, but they passionately wanted education for their children, and the local teachers did the best they could. Not until 1950 did the British send the first teacher.

In spite of the blessings of literacy and education, Pitcairners could not have existed with only book learning – it was their maritime excellence, their knowledge of the ocean and the weather, that sustained the island for 220 years, without much help from the outside. It was also their only lifeline to the world out there.

SEAMANSHIP

Officers on the “Surrey” in 1821 told how the young men came out to meet them, and the officers waited in the boat outside the harbor, the native canoes going in first, then Ed Quintal swimming back out to guide, the rest got upon a high rock. *“This scene, I think, the most romantic I ever read of, or even saw. The men on the rocks, with the plantain leaves in their hands, watched the roll of the sea, and kept us from coming in till the subsiding of the waves offered a good opportunity, when they all waved their leaves and cried out: Start now”* They took hold of the boat and ran her out of the surf, the passengers got out and the islanders took the boat on their shoulders and carried up into the shade.

A yachtsman’s observations in 1935: *“a tanned and wellbuilt young man with unmistakable traces of Polynesian blood braced in the stern.... wielding a long heavy sweep of a rudder. He was Andrew Young, lineal descendant of Lieut Young of the Bounty. The oarsmen obeyed his low crisp orders implicitly, and there was no levity or useless talk as we neared the deadly line of smoking breakers which curled and roared over a barrier of ugly looking rocks....”* Access to Pitcairn has not changed since 1808, for over 200 years the Pitcairn boats and canoes have carried cargo and passengers ashore in the same way, though we got motorized boats today.

In December 1900 the ship Pyrene arrived off the island, with fire in the cargo. Island leader Russell McCoy piloted the ship to Mangareva, where it was grounded and the ship saved. The story inspired Jack London to write the novel “The Seed of McCoy”, presenting our Russell as a hero.

CHURCH

Ships’ crew of the first part of the 19th Century found a very law-abiding and God-abiding community. There had been only one sermon during Fletcher Christian’s lifetime, but Adams instituted family worship twice a day, church worship twice a week, and the decision to live by the Bible saved them from the earlier chaos and anarchy. The church was until recently the main social arena, and many of the traditions centred around church. Since they didn’t have money, they invented their own tithe system, - produce from every tenth row in the garden, every tenth fish caught etc, was carried to the tithe house to be sold to other islanders or on the ships.

BUILDING, CARPENTRY

Their only link with the outside world – longboats and fishing canoes - were built by the Pitcairn men. They used local timber, first looking for trees the right length and shape, then cutting it on their pitsaw. They were excellent builders and carpenters, whether boats, houses or furniture, all with elegant and functional lines. Russell McCoy designed and built a longboat in the late 1800s, considered better suited for Pitcairn than the one Queen Victoria sent, which was mainly kept on display, and Russell's boat was the model for the later longboats. The last longboat was built at the Edge in 1982. Today the longboats are made of aluminium, the canoes of fiberglass and marine ply.

In 1892 they built their famous two story church and dormitories for their proposed missionary school for Pacific youth.

In 1916 the 45 feet long schooner "Messenger" was launched, said to have cost 15 shilling, built on public work. The nails were made from old iron collected from every Pitcairn family. They were desperate for contact with the outside world, and the "Messenger" provided an outlet for their produce, a chance to trade and to travel. But they lost her after four years, in 1920 she sank off the island in a bad storm, and the 17 passengers rescued by a passing ship. Andrew told the story:

"On her last trip we had sent six bags of dried tith plun, but har crew gave it to their friends in Mangareva. The Lord punished them by sinking the ship, they were just within sight of Pitcairn, and islanders saw them in the loward. Every morning people go up fe look out yenna, hoping for good weather so dem could come ashore, but weather beat them back. On Tuesday boat go out fe try help dem. I was crew for Emmen, and Lincoln on har schooner.....Them bin out of food lorng time, and weather sink Messenger".

In the 1960s the Pitcairn men built the first jetty on the extension that the rocks Mummy and Duddy already formed, to give more protection in the harbour. They were not engineers, but they mixed concrete, blew up rocks and managed to create a jetty which lasted for decades, without any expert help. A team of Royal Engineers were present to plan and supervise work on later extensions to the jetty.

RUNNING AND TRANSPORT

I don't know when the unique Pitcairn wheelbarrow was invented and put to use, but probably more than a hundred years ago. It was used for carrying garden produce, tools and - children. The men also carried their to'os - a stick over their shoulders with a basket hanging at each end to balance it. In the mid-60s the first two-wheel motorbike arrived, then the ATVs, and the art of running died out. Pitcairners of old were excellent runners, because they had to be.

Maynard tull : *" when ship had been sighted and the bells rung, all the men had to get to the landing, and we waited for no one. We had to row, and could not waste precious moments in case we lost the ship. Long before I was old enough to go out to ship, I had to run get Christy who was out fishing, and could not hear the bells ring. At Aute Fence I met Jebed our magistrate, and he told me to go home, they would not wait for Christy. But I kept going, and found Christy at Danfall. He ran while I carried his fishing basket. When Jebed arrived at the landing, Christy was there, breathless but ready for his turn at the oars."*

“One time when most of us had run out of gunpowder, Floyd offered a tin of gunpowder to anyone who could run to Tedside and bring back a handful of sand from the beach there within 30 minutes. (that is at least one hour’s walk, and very steep on both sides of Big Ridge) Caddy was a young man then, and did it in 35 minutes. But Floyd gave him the prize after all. Oh, Caddy could run goooood!!”

VILLAGE

A description of the village in the very early days: *“Their habitations are extremely neat, infinitely superior to what we saw at the Marquesas Islands. The little village at Pitcairn forms a pretty square. The centre is a fine lawn where the poultry wander, but is fenced in so as to prevent the intrusion of hogs. It was easy to perceive that in this establishment, the labour and ingenuity of European hands had been exerted. We never witnessed any regular plan of laying out the grounds in the other islands we visited, or forming plantations”.*

Their houses were different from Polynesian dwellings, and from Western style houses. They were unique - with wooden sliding shutters for windows, long tables with benches, beds in one big room upstairs, reached by a ladder. All furniture was homemade until recently. The kitchen was a separate cookhouse, according to Polynesian traditions, but the white picket fence was very European.

Mattresses were stuffed with roohooloo, the crackling dried banana leaves, and folks remember sleeping on them till it became more common and affordable to order the commercial mattress from New Zealand.

Buffett tells in his diary of 1869 that the women were cutting aute in Aute Valley and Brown’s Water for two weeks, and after another week the women had finished beating the tapa. It took a lot of time to produce enough clothes for a household.

Their clothes and bedding were made of tapa, canvas from sails or sailors’ clothes which the women transformed into dresses, blouses etc. Later on they got donations from overseas friends, and that continued into our days, when they also sewed their clothes.

They made their own shoes from canvas and rope, but that was for dressing up – even in 1973 when I arrived, almost everybody went barefoot, except in church.

WATER

The only water was from the rain and a few precious springs. The islanders had reservoirs in Tedside, and carried water to town in calabashes. The innovative Russell McCoy set up a piping system to supply water from Brown’s Spring to town, an aquaduct constructed of split bamboos on trestles, which conveyed water to the village. While McCoy’s generation used split bamboo, we use rubber hoses, but otherwise the principle is the same, so not much have changed. To store rainwater running off the roof, big concrete cisterns were set up by every house to take them through the draughts.

TRADING

There was no store on Pitcairn till the 1960s, and whatever the islanders needed, they had to get it trading with ships. Money was non-existent, and they learnt to barter with what they had. Not all their requirements could be bought on the island. In 1912 the council reported to British authorities that fungus, arrowroot and coffee had taken the place of cash on the island, and court fines were paid in produce. In the 1960s government jobs were established, and people were paid money for their work.

The Pitcairners exported fungus, coffee, dried bananas, arrowroot flour, wanawana, welk, shells etc to Mangareva and Tahiti from the 1890s till 1920.

Maynard talked about the harvesting of fungus: *“Every other month the bells rang for people to pick fungus. As soon as we gathered at the Square with our baskets, the magistrate shouted GO!, and people disappeared in every direction. We were running on every hill, everybody wanted to come first to the grounds to fill their baskets. The fungus was dried in the sun, baked in ovens and sent to Mangareva and Tahiti on the trading schooners. One family could easily pick four basketfuls, and that meant a whole bag of dried fungus to send on the schooner, in return for flour or rice from the islands.”*

One of His Majesty’s ships, the “Algerine”, picked up 77 bags of fungus, 7 bags of coffee and 5 bags of arrowroot to be delivered in Tahiti for sale 1913, and Captain Brooker was impressed with their will to expand and by the stubbornness of their character. The “Algerine” was the last official visit of HM ships for almost 25 years.

Pitcairn lost contact with Mangareva after the “Messenger” sank, but ships coming through the Panama Canal started visiting. They sold fresh fruit and the new commodity – carvings – to passengers on the steam ships. The Austrian sailor Leffler taught the men the art of carving, which even today is developing and expanding with new ideas and concepts for the tourist trade.

Oranges was exported to New Zealand till the 1960s. Up to 300 crates were sent off on one single ship, but it was a risky business. If the expected ship didn’t turn up, the oranges rotted.

Export possibilities have not improved the last hundred years, we are not allowed to export fruit or veges to Mangareva, the only port we have direct contact with through the “Claymore”.

The community spirit was very strong, because safety and security was in their family, their clan, their neighbour, there was no other “insurance” for sickness or for old age. They traded as a community on the ships, tithing first, then individual trading. The shareout principle was another example of the community spirit, sharing out equally to each family, so there was no creation of a society of rich and poor, all islanders belonged to the same social class.

Beechey told that the islanders had no kitchen tools, no pots and pans, but cooked everything by baking it in dirt ovens. Little by little they learnt the European way, made some tools themselves and traded for others.

Pipon on the Tagus said in 1815: *“We may well observe that here necessity is the mother of invention, for the forge they landed from the Bounty, being now out of order, by dint of labour and assiduity they have now got into a method of making their own agricultural tools, beating out their spades of solid iron, and in reality very well executed”.*

Pitcairners of old produced their own salt. Maynard told: *“Boiling salt took weeks. Large pans of sea water were boiled till only salt was left in the pan, shoveled out and the pans filled up again for the next boil. Several families worked together, for it was hard work, and took a long time. We used to set up camp down Isaac’s, in*

Tedside or Tautama, and the women minded the pan, while the men went for firewood all day, for they could not let the fire go out. The men kept the fire going through the night”.

A visiting captain in 1851 describes pillhi – the substitute for bread, which was yams or plantains grated into a paste on a rough stone made for the purpose and either baked or fried. We still eat pillhi, it has survived the passing of centuries.

Through the hard work of growing and processing arrowroot, they got the raw material for making biscuits and puddings. Arrowroot flour was also used in bread dough with other emergency ingredients whenever there was a shortage of plain flour. As late as in 1982/83 we had no supplies for eight months, so we all ran short of flour, and I put whatever I could find in my bread – arrowroot, corn, yams, kumara, rolled oats, manioka, coconut - everything but bark.

RADIO AND COMMUNICATION

Andrew Young was a self taught radio operator. Early in the 1920s he and three friends practiced morse in the night by flashing signals by lantern to each other from the different hilltops around Adamstown.

In 1928 he set up his first x-tal receiver, driven by an old car engine. For years the men had watched for ship up on the ridge as part of public work, but now they could rely on Andrew telling beforehand when ships would call. On hearing about his enterprise, the Marconi company sent two radio technicians to install a new transceiver, issuing a ham licence to him, and he operated as VR6AY for many years.

There was no government-funded radio station till the war years, Andrew and friends initiated and ran the station themselves till then.

Even before the one party telephone line was established in the 1950s, islanders communicated over great distances by hollering in a special way, Beechey describes a “shrill whoop” which the islanders understood. The call “sail-oh” for ship was used from the 19th Century till we bought VHF radios in the 1980s. The VHF maritime radios were used like inter island telephones until each home got a real satellite phone installed by the admin in 2006.

MEDICAL

Pitcairn never had a medical professional till the 1950s, except for doctors coming ashore for a few hours. The first doctor to stay beyond a week or two, lived here for five months in 1937. He was kept very busy, and the first three months he gave 558 examinations and treatments.

The islanders managed as best they could with medicines they got from ships or their own concoctions. During the many influenza epidemics with half the population in bed, they were nursed by those still up and around. The school would close for weeks on end, and most activities would come to a halt.

The islanders have suffered from, and died from, dysentery, typhoid, asthma, lockjaw, burns, tuberculosis, dropsy. Their amateur medic Nobbs prescribed diluted ashes, ether, brandy, laudanum, turpentine, bread poultice, emetics, bleeding, “calomel and jalap”. The registry book tells *“there is not a sufficient number of persons in health to dig the yams..... Truly the hand of God is upon us, O Lord in wrath remember mercy.”*

All through our history there were rescue operations and community efforts to save victims of accidents. We all know about Howlandfall, Danfall and other places, and everybody would offer their muscles and ingenuity, as they still do today.

ENTERTAINMENT

Islanders had to invent their own entertainment to break the monotony. Today things have changed, first with movies in the public hall in the 50s, and then TV and DVDs in every home.

Back in 1825 there was a party in Quintal's house in honour of Captain Beechey. The musicians were sitting on one side of the large room, lighted by blazing doodwee nuts. Arthur Quintal was head musician, sitting on the floor, with a large gourd in front of him with a piece of musical wood which he balanced upon his toes. He struck the instrument alternatively with two sticks, accompanied by Dolly on a gourd with a hole cut in one end, which she was beating with both hands. Another one made music on the Bounty's old copper fish kettle. They preferred their own homemade instruments to the officers' violins.

In the 19th Century they entertained each other and visitors by getting together to sing and play. After that organized entertainment seemed to be at a low until the 1950s when the school teacher and community leaders arranged concerts with skits and music. There were cricket games in Aute Valley with the losing team serving dinner to the winning team afterwards, also frequent family and public dinners to celebrate birthdays and other events. The yearly summer camping at Flatland was a popular event till the 1960s.

Beechey said in 1825: *"During the whole time I was with them, I never heard them indulge in a joke, or other levity, and the practice of it is apt to give offence. They are so accustomed to take what is said in its literal meaning, that irony is always considered a falsehood in spite of explanation. They could not see the propriety of uttering what was not strictly true, for any purpose whatever."* An incredible statement considering their sense of humour today, their ability to create laughter by exaggerations, by understatements, by laughing at themselves, by their sense of the ridiculous. Maybe it grew out of their need for a survival tool during the 1930s and 40s, which I call "the dark ages", when they were extremely isolated, left to their own devices, and when terrible things happened that they had to deal with in their own way. Like magistrate Gerard wrote to the Deputy Commissioner in Tahiti way back in 1912, when the island had not received any official communication for a year and a half "*we have to make things the best we can under the circumstances.*"

They were not sophisticated in political and legal matters, decisions were both naïve and arbitrary, but I am convinced their first Constitution is a result of their own concept of a democratic society – and a groundbreaking document for human rights. Captain Russell, who assisted with their document in 1838, would not have thought of equal voting rights and equal right to education for both gender.

In spite of regular reports from British observers about extreme sexual practices, 13 year old mothers, 30 children out of wedlock by 1908 (shocking facts for that time), there was absolutely no corrective or educational measures taken by the British authorities until 2000. That is the real tragedy of the Pitcairners' isolation.