

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Florence "Johnny" Frisbie: Life Lessons from Pukapuka Atoll

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Most of the time, it was a kind of challenge that was exciting. It was. I think it's because, you know, we live on small islands, and we go out on the reef, and the big waves wash suddenly, and we're down and struggling to get up again. And it was perhaps that background and upbringing that we had this great sense of excitement, you know. And yet, it's partly survival.

Florence "Johnny" Frisbie grew up living far away from the comforts of a traditional population center, surviving on whatever food a small coral atoll and the ocean might provide. The odyssey of Johnny Frisbie, next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawai'i's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Florence "Johnny" Frisbie of Honolulu has spent her entire life on an odyssey. Born in Tahiti, Johnny traveled the South Pacific, spending her childhood on small remote Cook Islands like Pukapuka, and the virtually uninhabited Suvarrow. At age twelve, she started documenting her adventures. At fifteen, she was a published author, the first Pacific Island woman to accomplish that. Her autobiography was Miss Ulysses of Pukapuka. Johnny was born to a native Pukapukan mother and an American father, Robert Dean Frisbie, who was a writer and South Seas trader.

I understand your dad was from Ohio.

Yeah.

And your mom was from Pukapuka.

Yeah. Yeah.

How did that happen?

Well, he left San Francisco and ended up in Tahiti. Yes, yes, yes. And so, he arrived in Tahiti and met James Hall, and they became very close friends. But then, he lived there for many years, many many years, and also could see where Tahiti is becoming a place

where a lot of ships and sailors, and wanderers, explorers are ending up in big parties and drinking, and all that. And he was disillusioned, and wanted something even simpler and quieter, and a culture that suits him with you know, his dream. And he ended up on Pukapuka.

Can you tell us about Pukapuka? When we talk about Pacific Island neighbors, Pukapuka is far, far from Hawai'i. Can you tell us about it, and your life there?

Pukapuka is a small atoll, north of all the Cook Islands. It's the most northern island of the fifteen islands. My mother comes from Pukapuka, and her mother before her, before her.

She was much younger than he?

Yes, yes; she was sixteen. Yeah.

And how was that? So, there was an age difference, a cultural difference. How did that work out?

That really is not important, you know, the age. Women don't sit around thinking about their age and worrying about growing old. That's not in the picture, you know. It's whether it works; something works. And my father being a White man, you know, Oh, hey, this is very nice, you know, and he wants our daughter. This is the family and the tribe talking about, you know, What are we gonna do, you know. We don't know him. You know, they didn't know anything about the White man, as they called him. And so, it was so foreign to them.

How many White men or White people—

Only one. Yeah.

On the island?

Only him. Yes.

I see.

Yeah. And they'd come and go. They'd come on a boat, and leave the next day. But he stayed. And so, they wonder, What do we do? You know, he wants to marry our daughter, and the sixteen age didn't come into the conversation whatsoever. So, they all assessed his ability to fish, you know, and ability to paddle, and ability to husk coconut, and the way that he speaks softly. But they kinda wondered about him, because he didn't go to church. He wouldn't go to church, and they thought that

might be a problem. But no, you know, the fact that he could do all these other things Pukapukan men do, is sufficient to give our daughter to him. That's how it happened.

All right; so he passed the test.

And the marriage was a success?

Yes; very much so.

How many children followed?

Five; five. The eldest is Charles, and he was taken away from my mother when my father was away, when she gave birth to him.

Um, you want to hear that story?

Yes; I don't know that story.

Oh, oh. Oh—

Charles was taken away from your mother?

Well, there's a custom on Pukapuka. The first and second children of the couple is the father's share. And then, he gives them away as a gift to his parents or grandparents, or a brother who, you know, can't have children, his wife cannot have children. And then, the third and fourth children are the mother's share, and naturally, this is a gift, the ultimate gift, to to her mother, to her parents, and sister or brother. And so, when my mother and father moved to Rarotonga, my father had a job offered on another island, copra making, making copra out of coconut, the coconut meat. So, my mother, she was then seventeen, eighteen years old, was left on Rarotonga in the care of a grandaunt who did not have any children. So when my mother gave birth, Pikipiki took the baby and said, This is our share; I'll take this baby. And my mother coming from that culture, and my father not being there said, Yeah, okay; yeah, you take. And so, she took the baby, Charles, and disappeared into the valley. When my father came back, found he had no firstborn, he was devastated. So, he asked two policemen on the island to please go fetch this woman, and bring back his son. And those men, knowing the culture, understanding fully what this natural process was, just kinda walked in the valley, looked around, came back and said, Oh, can't find her.

So, he never saw his son?

No.

Until how long—

Not until he was thirteen; he was thirteen.

Oh ...

He came back thirteen years later.

Well, you're number two. Were you given away?

No; because my father made sure that he was there.

No more culture like that; right? So, all the other children ...

Yes.

Two, three, four stayed.

M-hm; yeah.

What was everyday life like when you and your dad, and our mom and siblings were there? What did you do during the day? What was family life like?

We were very busy kids. You know, the kids were busy. We played a lot; climbed trees, and hide-and-seek, and swim in the lagoon, swim out to the corals way out. But we had duties, too. You know, we had to help the women in the taro patch. Yeah.

Oh, that's hard work.

Yeah, well, we played most of the time.

In 1937, Johnny Frisbie's mother gave birth to her fifth child. Two weeks later, she fell ill, and her condition worsened. She passed away the following year.

Your mother was so young when she passed away of tuberculosis; twenty-six.

M-hm, m-hm.

What happened in your family at that time? What were some of the effects?

Well, my father took total control of the family. You know, he became the mother, father, because my mother had asked him before she died not to separate us. 'Cause that is commonly what happens with families, and her parents were very eager to take

two of us as their share. And my father said, No, no, you know, these are my children too, you know, and I don't belong in that. And that was the reason why my father decided that we leave Pukapuka.

What was the thing you missed most about your mother after she was gone?

When I think about her, what I remember of her, I just ... remember her looking at me, you know, just like looking at me. You know.

Like she loved you.

Yeah. And so, I'm happy when she looks up at me like that, and all this love and a faint smile. Oh; I take a breath, and I run away, then disappear for hours and play with my friends, you know. And then, I'll think about it, and I'll come back and just stand in front of her to get this ...

M-hm.

I missed that.

Johnny Frisbie's father moved the family around the South Pacific to places like Fiji, and even settled on Suwarrow Atoll in the Northern Cook Islands. They lived on tiny Anchorage Island, which had a landmass of less than one-tenth of a square mile. It was there, that the motherless family faced a terrible storm.

This was Suwarrow, uninhabited island.

And were you the only residents?

There were four others. And they were sent there by the New Zealand government to keep an eye on the war activities. You know, Japanese, maybe submarine, whatever it is.

I see.

And so, they were on that island, and on other islands as well. Yeah.

Your father ended up lashing you to trees.

Yeah, yeah.

All the kids; right?

Yeah, yeah. M-hm.

Tying you up there.

Well, before that, before preparing for the hurricane, he tied ropes around our waist, and there was plenty left here to put around the coconut tree. Okay; and then, when the seas rise, it takes us up, and when it comes down, brings us down. That was the plan. But before nighttime, before dark, the wind was just wild. He noticed that the coconut trees were being uprooted or broken in half. And so, he said, Ooh, that's not gonna work.

You can laugh now.

So, that plan was thrown out. When a big wave hit the house, the thatched roof house we were in, it was nighttime, but it was light because of the lightning; it was just constant, so there was light. We left the house and crawled. You couldn't stand up; you crawl and just cling to the gravel and the sand, whatever you can, towards the three trees that were still standing.

What kind of trees?

Tamanu trees. So, he just tied us to the branches. Yeah, to the branches.

How many kids did he tie?

Four.

And then tied himself?

No; no. He just hung on. Yeah; he just hung onto a branch when the wind was powerful.

But wasn't the sea level up over the sand? I mean, basically, the island got covered, didn't it?

We went way up. Yeah; we climbed up to the top. Yeah, the top where the branches snake off like this. And he had his hut right on top of those branches. But yeah, it worked.

And I know in your book you say that three-quarters of the landmass of the atoll was washed away.

Yeah; it was cut. Here's the island here, and ended up with two channels. The island was just ... split, you know, by the sea.

What happened to the other observers who were on the island?

Well, my father said they could, of course, come up to his house, to his hut up at the top, and it would save them too. Two of them were Europeans, New Zealanders, and this was kind of very different for them. Very, very different. And they just shook the whole time. It was cold, they were frightened, they were totally helpless. But the two boys from Manihiki were okay. You know, they were from another atoll which is called Manihiki.

How were you doing? You were a little kid.

Yeah. We were fine.

How crazy was it? You were being buffeted by winds, the water level was coming up.

Well, like I say, there was some excitement to it. Ooh, ooh, ooh; ooh, I hope it doesn't reach us. You know, and hang on and pray. 'Cause my grandmother always says, Always pray, always pray. You know, so pray. I don't remember being totally overpowered by fear; I don't remember. It was exciting, and it was a matter of survival. You know, thinking about, looking and, okay, this happens here, that branch, there's another branch there. I do that to this day. When I drive to Punaluu, I'm looking at all the trees in case of tidal wave, you know. And with my grandchildren, I said, No, that's not good, because they can't climb up that one. You know, it's gotta be where there are branches so we can get up. So, I do the same thing.

Plan B; right?

Yeah. And so, there, you have to keep an eye on what next. You know, what next.
Yeah.

And at some point, the water subsided, the winds stopped.

Yeah.

And, what?

Yeah.

You're on a decimated island.

Yeah, yeah. Well, you know, there was plenty of fish and turtles, and sharks in the middle of the island where the waves came from the ocean, from the lagoon. Meet in the middle, they bring all these beautiful fish, this lovely stuff. And we were able to live on that for two days only, and then they began to decompose. Yeah; and then the flies; millions of flies eating all these dead fish. Yeah.

What'd you do after that?

We ate birds. Yeah. The birds returned after the hurricane. The birds had disappeared somewhere else, and after the hurricane, you could hear them at night. We heard them one night all making their noise as they were coming back to Suvarrow. So, we ate lots of birds. And we made spears out of wood. Made spears, and we'd go on the reef and spear grouper, other fishes.

Amidst many personal hardships, Johnny Frisbie's father, Robert Dean Frisbie, continued to write travel stories, news articles, and six published books about island life in Polynesia.

His first book was called The Book of Puka-Puka, and it's a classic. And then, there's Amaru. It's the first novel, that's the first novel he wrote. And I typed it; that's how I learned to type. He gave it to me. He wrote at night, write by hand in the light of a lantern, and then he would give me the script in the morning. And I'd type it on his little Remington like this.

So, not surprising, you would turn out to be a writer.

Because you'd been doing diaries.

I know. Yeah. And then, his last book, Dawn Sails North, he did the same thing. We were on Rarotonga then. So, he decided, enough of this, so he sent for an instruction book on how to type with all the fingers. So, I taught myself how to do that, and typed Dawn Sails North. That was his last book. It was published after his death. Yeah.

Johnny Frisbie, encouraged by her father's love of storytelling and literature, wrote Miss Ulysses from Puka-Puka. Audiences in the Western world started to read about her South Sea adventures in 1948.

You wrote this book between the ages of twelve and fourteen.

I started a diary at twelve. Yeah. No, I finished the book at fifteen. Yeah; it came out when I was sixteen, just before my father died.

So, it was a diary.

Yes.

In which language did you keep your diary?

Oh, I kept it in Pukapukan mainly, and then English. As I went along, I write in Pukapukan, and I would ask my father what that word is in English. And he would explain it to me, and then I would use the word. By the time I was fourteen, I was able to write in English. Might be not the best, you know, but I was able to use adjectives because my father said, You can't just write like that, you have to put a colorful word there to make the next word happy.

And Miss Ulysses; where did Miss Ulysses come from?

Well, because there were no children's books in that part of the world growing up, my father at nighttime, rather than read, and there's no children's stories, he would tell us the story of Ulysses in the Iliad and the Odyssey of Homer. Every night, we would go through the whole series of adventures, Ulysses. And that was all I knew, you know. And so, when the book was finished, then my father said, Well, we gotta find a name for this book. Hm, hm; we thought about it, thought about it for days, and days. And then, I said, Oh, how about Miss Ulysses? Because I'm Ulysses, aren't I, Papa? You know.

You identified with Ulysses. And it was an adventuring kind of life. I mean, you were facing the elements.

Yeah, that's right. And we traveled a lot. You know, we did.

Johnny Frisbie's father, Robert Dean Frisbie, contracted the same illness that took his wife. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1943. Despite his declining health, he continued to travel the South Pacific and write. In 1948, Robert Dean Frisbie died at age fifty-two, orphaning Johnny and her siblings.

Did your dad pass away in ...

We were on Rarotonga.

Rarotonga.

The big island of Rarotonga; m-hm. And he's buried there. M-hm.

And you became an orphan.

Yes; m-hm. Yes; the three of us. He had sent my two brothers to New Zealand just before he passed away.

Someone who's lost their parents as a child would have devastating feelings of loss. But it sounds like ...

Yes, with my father, because I relied so much on him for an extension of my Polynesian Pukapukans. You know, it was just natural, 'cause he understood my Polynesian-ness, you know, and my eagerness to be like him. You know. And he understood that, and I missed that, I didn't know where to turn.

And then, who decided what would happen to the children?

I did; yeah. Peter and Barbara Engle from Lanikai had read my father's books. And so, they sailed on a yacht, The Loafer, through some of the Pacific island to find him, because they were told that he was in that part of the world. So, when they finally got to Tahiti, they looked up James Michener, who informed them that my father was on living on Rarotonga. So, they sailed to Rarotonga, and we met. And by that time, my father had an idea, he had an inkling he wasn't going to live long, so he asked the Engles if they would take me with them and make sure that I get an education. Okay; and they promised. So, when he passed away, Barbara Engle wrote to me to say they were in New Zealand, as soon as they arrived in Hawaii, they will send for me. And that happened in April 1950. April 23, 1950, I landed at the old airport in Honolulu. Lived with them, and immediately, I started looking for families for my two sisters. The Engles happened to be very, very good friends with the Dawsons of Kailua, and they had three sons, and I used to play with them all the time. And I thought, Oh, uh-huh, no sister, hm, okay. So, I approached Sumai and Lee Dawson and asked if they would like a sister for their sons. And they said, Yes, absolutely. Boop, about six months later, my younger sister was here. And while I was at camp as a counselor at Kokokahi Camp a year later, the Fenders, Ma and Pa Fender, who managed the camp where the YWCA is now, that was Kokokahi Camp, that was in '51, and we got to know each other. And I thought, Oh, okay, they're very nice people. And so, I asked if they would take my sister Elaine. And they said, Yes, absolutely.

Just amazing.

And never having met them, but knowing you. So, you functioned as the oldest child.

Yeah, yeah.

Your brother had been given away.

Oh, yeah; m-hm, yeah. So, they arrived, and we lived happily ever after. And they were so nice, because every weekend, we would be together.

Johnny Frisbie and her two sisters were reunited on Oahu in 1952. The Frisbie daughters spent the remainder of their teenage years in Hawai'i raised separately in different families. Much like her adventurous father, Johnny did not stay planted in Hawaii for very long, and after graduating from Punahou School in Honolulu, the travels of Miss Ulysses began again. At the time of our conversation in early 2017, she was nearly eighty-five years old, and getting ready for more Pacific travels. Mahalo to Florence "Johnny" Frisbie of Honolulu, who as a teen was credited as the first published female author from Polynesia, for sharing your story with us. And thank you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

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Your first name is actually Florence.

Mm.

But everyone knows you as Johnny.

M-hm.

How did that happen?

It happened in Tahiti, and my mother was in labor. And my father and all his friends, Andy Thompson, James, all his friends, sailor friends were drinking Johnny Walker whiskey. One of the friends said, Girl or boy, it's gonna be Johnny. You know.

[END]