**Yap Homecoming Talk: June 2014**

Who was David Deane O’Keefe? (subject of the book *His Majesty O’Keefe*)

* An Irishman (born in 1824) who came to the US on the *Sir Robert Peel* in 1848, the high tide of the early Irish immigration. He lived in Savannah, Georgia, where he took a job laying railroad ties for a while, but soon turned toward the sea and worked his way up from an apprentice seaman to captain. He captained ships along the coast for some years, probably doing blockade running during the Civil War. After the war he was master of a trading schooner that brought rum and sugar from the provinces of Cuba. In 1869 he married a fiery young woman by the name of Catherine Masters and had a daughter, who later married a semi-professional baseball player named Frank Butler.
* O’Keefe left Savannah secretly and hurriedly in 1871 when he learned that the family of a crew member he had killed a few years earlier were looking for him. His fortunes took a turn for the worse at the same time, since O’Keefe found it difficult to get regular work. Rather than become the target of revenge, O’Keefe snuck out of Savannah to seek his fortune elsewhere. He would never return.
* From Savannah it was off to New York, then to Liverpool, and then to Manila. From there he accepted a position on another ship to Hong Kong, and soon was given his own ship. One more trading run, he wrote to his wife in the fall of 1872 and then he expected to be home by Christmas. O’Keefe was as good as his word. By Christmas 1872 he was home–not in Savannah, but in Yap, which would be his home until his death thirty years later.

What did O’Keefe find in Yap?

* Yap was at this time an outpost that was just beginning the transition that would soon make the island the trade center of the Carolines. Copra was just then becoming the major trade item for European and American commercial interests. Trading vessels sailed into Yap and installed copra traders around the island, and in the neighboring islands. But none of them seemed to be as successful as O’Keefe.
* O'Keefe soon set about building a web of trade stations on Yap and new posts on Palau and other islands. On his runs to Singapore and Hong Kong, he began to recruit agents to man his new trade posts. He was also acquiring a fleet of trading vessels: the *Seabird* in 1876, the *Wrecker* in 1877, the *Queen* in 1878, and the *Lilla* in 1880.
* By the early 1880s, Yap had come onto its own as a flourishing trade center, largely through the efforts of O’Keefe. By this time, 20 or 30 vessels were visiting Yap each year, and a large steamer was arriving to collect the copra every other month. Soon the island would become a coaling station. Each year 1,500 tons of copra were exported–more than double the amount produced in the Marshalls. Over a dozen whites resided on Yap proper, and many more moved through the neighboring islands. Yap had become famous through the Pacific as a trade deport.
* O’Keefe clearly dominated the copra trade. He shipped out more copra than the other three major firms combined. His strategy was something for which the man became famous. He would transport Yapese teams to Palau to quarry the limestone discs that served as “money” on Yap, but on condition that the men who quarried the discs agreed to serve as laborers for six months producing copra. The strategy was successful enough to make him rich–his estate was estimated at about $100,000 when he died in 1903. In today’s terms he would have been a millionaire.

How did O’Keefe accomplish all this?

* As a merchant, he understood that the formula for success is to give trade partners what they want while getting what you want. He wanted copra that he could sell, while Yapese wanted the stone money they valued so highly, along with some of the trade goods that had become so desired by that time. The Yapese people trusted O’Keefe–he was fair to them, he seemed to be comfortable with them hanging around (there were always people swigging from a bottle around his house in Terang), and he brought as much “wealth” to the island as he took from it. All you have to do is count the stones that date back to O’Keefe’s voyages to Palau.
* The tiny island of Mapia, southwest of Palau, culturally and linguistically Micronesian but politically affiliated with Indonesia, the island he had acquired from the Sultan of Ternate in 1878, became the gemstone in O’Keefe’s diadem. The entire island became a copra plantation, out-producing places much larger in size. There O’Keefe found a wife, the daughter of Harry Terry–a woman by the name of Charlotte. Their third child, Nellie, was the grandmother of Victorine, who we are happy to have with us today. O’Keefe left Charlotte on Mapia to run his home and raise his children by her there, but installed as the mistress of his estate in Yap her aunt, Dolibu.

* O'Keefe's headquarters on Terang was a showpiece of tropical elegance with a two-story red brick house, a spacious warehouse, living quarters for the workers, and a long stone wharf. Over the island, in place of the Union Jack that once flew there, was O'Keefe's own ensign–the initials OK in black on a white background. The home was furnished with a large dining room table, silver utensils, elegant bookshelves and a piano. The house had a well-stocked library, including most of the British and American classics, since O'Keefe enjoyed a reputation as an avid reader.
* Books and booze were the signature of O’Keefe’s manor. But Terang was not just a showplace for the entertainment of ship captains and other Western visitors. While O’Keefe and his guests were upstairs singing Irish ballads to the accompaniment of the grand piano, others downstairs were enjoying themselves just as much. Yapese could usually be found hanging out with the ragtag collection of Chinese, Malayans, Sonsorolese and other employees. They would be swigging rum in boisterous drinking circles, especially when the ships were loading. Their good cheer was an echo of what was happening upstairs in the living quarters of O’Keefe’s mansion.

What does all this have to say to us today?

* OK was the leading figure in the development of the copra trade, which in turn was responsible for the expanding importance of Yap in the last part of the 19th century. So we can use of OK the title given him by authors, “His Majesty”–not because he laid claim to a chiefly title, never mind a kingly one, but because he was a central figure during this time.
* He didn't represent national interests, as many foreigners who preceded and followed him did. In fact, he could be called something of an alien, a man without a country. After all, he came from Ireland, lived in the US for several years, visited Hong Kong and Singapore frequently, was a tenant of an Indonesian sultan, and settled in Yap. He was a man without a country, or perhaps a man of many countries.
* OK took seriously the people and their culture. He built his empire on his understanding of what they needed and how he might provide this while expanding his own business. He showed a cultural sensitivity well beyond that usual for his day. He never pretended to be Yapese, but he was also able to deal with the island people respectfully and effectively.
* He seems to have understood Yapese and knew what they wanted. His success made him the target of accusations from his trade rivals, and he was forever defending himself against false charges from others. Every time a naval ship visited the island, his rival would introduce charges against him–flogging islanders, throwing them overboard in shark-infested waters, abduction and rape of local girls, allowing his workers to be beaten or shot to death by his drunken agents. These malicious charges aligned him with the local people, who were also charged with crimes by foreign traders.
* He was a link between Yap and its neighbor, Palau. OK traded in both places, and he brought Yapese to Palau to quarry the limestone that was so cherished on Yap. But an incident in 1880, when one of his ships was wrecked on the reef off Ngarchelong in northern Babeldaob and plundered by the people brought him close to the political center of that island group. OK complained to a British warship about the pillaging of his wrecked ship and won a judgment against the people of Melekeok. When the captain of the British naval ship returned the following year to find that the fine had not been paid, he destroyed 14 large clubhouses in the district. Koror must have been overjoyed at the damage done to their old rival.
* He helped usher Yap into the modern age, just as Ibedul Louch did in Palau some years later. Accommodation with the outside world was going to have to be made at some point anyway. Why not have it happen on terms that are favorable to the local population? O’Keefe helped put Yap on the map as a trade center and helped steer it toward accommodation with the modern world. The formula for his success and renown was: respect for the people of Yap and willingness to build on their needs. This was amply repaid by Yapese.

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