

# Island king could be 'Bubba Rawleigh Mar

"His excellency" Tom Peeples wants to live on Hilton Head Island for life.

That's what they said when he was roasted Friday night at the kickoff banquet for the 10th annual Native Islander Allah Celebration.

Close friend Sonny Huntley even worried that the island's mayor since 1995, who breezed into a new five-year term in November, thinks he's supernatural.

"He was born and raised in Ridgeland,"



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Huntley said, "and he often refers to Ridgeland as 'God's country.'"

Other signs are everywhere, if you

look for them, Huntley said. Peeples came here as a carpenter. His favorite drink is Crown Royal. And everybody knows he married a queen. Peeples even brought a little Buddha home from Thailand "because he thought there was a strong family resemblance," Huntley said.

It took island native Thomas C. Barnwell Jr. to bring the "lifetime mayor" back down to earth.

Barnwell, who was roasted at the

same event last year, reminded the mayor that he is reaping the "residual income" from his late father, a "fantastic businessman" who sold everything from mints to wigs door-to-door on the island beginning 60 years ago. The elder Peeples got to know every soul on the island, most of them native islanders who celebrate their rare culture with a series of events throughout this month.

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# King

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He kept a Model A Ford on the island before there was a bridge. He would work the island for two days, spending the night with Benny Hudson. The car was filled with goodies: Pots, pans, hair products, clothing, candy, cookies, coffee pots, dishes.

"He even had a thing called liniment," Barnwell said.

Islanders called him "The Rawleigh Man" because he brought W.T. Rawleigh products to the door — spices from Sumatra; vanilla from Madagascar; coffee beans from the Andes; and all sorts of penetrating rubs, ointments, salves and balms.

"His father had many options for people as he made his rounds," said Barnwell, who is working on a book about the island before the first bridge opened in 1956. "He was the forerunner of network marketing."

Barnwell told how Tommie Peeples, the mayor's father, might give someone a large box of candy. They could sell the candy, they could hire others to help them sell the candy — or they could eat the candy.

One day "The Rawleigh Man" came to the door and the lady of the house knew she was in trouble because the box of candy had been eaten, not sold.

"Tell him I ain't here," she told her daughter.

The child answered the door and told Tommie Peeples, "Mama told me to tell you she ain't here."

She then pointed under the bed and said, "There she is."

"So they made a deal," Barnwell said. "She had some shrimp and okra on the stove, so Mr. Peeples took a seat and decided he'd sit right there and wait until it was done."

The mayor has benefited from that rare link into many island households, Barnwell said.

Then he suggested that when Peeples retires, he may want to set up his own mobile store and go into all the plantations selling his wares.

"You could be The Rawleigh Man Junior," Barnwell said, "or maybe Bubba Rawleigh Man."



Charles Jarrett/Special to the Packet

Mayor Tom and Mary Ann Peeples react as roast emcee Tim Singleton makes a joke about the gift of gourds from Hilton Head Island businessman Thomas C. Barnwell Jr.

To give him a head start, Barnwell said he was going to present Tom and Mary Ann Peeples with something he'd grown "on a farm in the Squire Pope section of Hilton Head." It was two large gourds, with colorful coastal scenes painted on them by Natalie Daise of the TV show "Gullah Gullah Island" fame.

Emcee Tim Singleton said he was worried for a second Barnwell was going to give the mayor a goat, like the ones he has grazing by the busy intersection of Gum Tree and Squire Pope roads.

Paula Harper Bethea said no one works harder than Peeples to "leave his little part of the world better than he found it."

Town manager Steve Riley said it was already past the mayor's bedtime so he gave him a pillow. He said they've worked well together every day for 15 years because they keep different schedules. They primarily communicate with voice messages, the mayor's starting when he gets up at 4:30 a.m., and Riley's starting closer to midnight.

And being a good bureaucrat, Riley came with charts and an easel, and a "Waiver of Retribution" for all the roasters:

"I, Thomas D. Peeples (aka 'His Excellency'), on this day do hereby and forevermore absolve, excuse, exculpate, exonerate, forgive, pardon,

release, and otherwise let off the hook (insert name) for all that he/she says, may say, does; may do, utters, or thinks without saying, implies directly or indirectly about Thomas D. Peeples, his family, his relatives, his pets if applicable, and friends, if any."

I guess that covers their jabs that the mayor is color blind and once rented a convertible to drive into the worst snow storm the Rockies had ever seen.

A slide show included picture of the mayor as a child; a hippie; a worker; a world traveler; a father; a husband; a Santa Claus; and a mayor cutting ribbons for things like the Cross Island Parkway, Shelter Cove Park and Chaplin Community Park.

Most of the snapshots were taken after 1979, the year Tommie Peeples was murdered while making the rounds in a rolling country store. He was still going door-to-door throughout Jasper County. Mr. Peeples was at a roadside picnic area near Hardeeville, where he often stopped for lunch. He was robbed of \$500. The crime has never been solved.

When the mayor finally got to the podium, his remarks were brief.

"I'm a pretty emotional guy — it's one of my downsides, frankly," he explained.

Then he said, "I was just thinking my dad would be really proud."

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## 'Rawleigh Man' Tommie Peeples was island icon

**T**hanks to Bennie Peeples of Hilton Head Island for sharing an essay about his father, the late Tommie Peeples, who ran sales routes on the island long before the first bridge opened in 1956.

Bennie may be best known as the longtime operator of an auction house in Hardeeville. He's an older brother of Hilton Head Island Mayor Tom Peeples.

Bennie worked for his father for about a year in the mid-1960s. Last year Tom's wife, Mary Ann Peeples, asked him to write down what he could remember about that experience for the Coastal Discovery Museum and for the family.

Bennie, who is fighting cancer, calls himself "an old 101st Airborne sergeant and Vietnam vet who is giving it hell and not giving up." He says the Veterans Affairs hospital in Charleston "has been wonderful to me. They have great doctors, nurses and staff who care, regardless of what is said about some departments of the VA."

### THE RAWLEIGH MAN (BOX)

By Bennie Peeples

Around 1941 a young man and his bride were trying to carve a living out of a 10-by-12-foot store near Pocotaligo with living quarters in the back. Today it would be unbelievable to try to live on \$30 to \$40 a month, and soon enough it also became impossible for Tommie and Sadie Peeples, my parents. Tommie dreamed of being a farmer one day, but never a salesman. Tough times go away but tough people never do, and you "do what you gotta do."

Sadie's uncle had made a living selling Rawleigh products door-to-door and told Tommie about areas available in southern Beaufort County and Jasper County. A cousin took my father and mother to Augusta, Ga., to buy a used car on a loan of \$100, and the Rawleigh Co. gave my father the territory around Hardeeville and Bluffton and credit on his first 30-day supply of products.

"The Rawleigh Man" was born. It was not long before my mother and father started paying back the bills they had accumulated and he was making a name for himself with the Rawleigh Co. As more areas came open, they gave him more territory to cover.

The Rawleigh Co. offered many products, including over-the-counter medicines, lemon and vanilla flavoring, black pepper, fly killer, livestock medicine and household items. My brother, current Hilton Head Island Mayor Tom Peeples, and I still swear by Rawleigh's External Anti-Pain Oil for sore muscles and other aches and pains. Double-strength vanilla flavoring still is used in my house.

Needing more territory, my father got permission to add a poor area no one wanted. It was called Hilton Head Island.

### 'RAWLEIGH BOY'

Mr. Charlie Simmons Sr. had a private ferry from Buckingham Landing

## ICON

Continued from 1C

to the island that was operated on "as-needed" basis during the week. Sometimes the old motor worked, and sometimes they paddled across, but every two weeks Tommie Peeples made the journey to the island. He stayed over on every trip, boarding with the Hudson family, which operated an oyster processing factory and wholesale seafood business from the "bounties of the sea."

One of my father's first calls on the island was to the home of a lady named Janie Drayton. I always remember the love and respect she and my father had for each other. As he knocked on her door and said, "Hello, Rawleigh Man," she looked at this young 120-pound, 5-foot-6 man and replied, "Man, you too little to be the man; you be the boy." From that time on the local residents called my father the "Rawleigh Boy."

I remember riding with him on his routes, which he repeated every two weeks.

"What do you need today? Cold season is coming! Need some cough syrup? Pay what you can and put the rest on the book," my father would say. There was no need to sign, no proof of purchase or debt, just trust between two people whose word was good enough for both.

On the back of his car was a chicken coop since some people paid with chickens or eggs. Some paid with fresh oysters, and life was good for all.

In 1943 my father was accepted in the Air Corps as a cadet to study flying. Due to his very high math scores he was able to attend Officer Candidate School and become an Air Corps officer as a navigator and something new, a radar officer. (Very few non-college boys were accepted in the Air Corps at that time.) He gave up all of his routes and went off to World War II. When he returned to the area

**With all of the modern means of transportation and stores all around, there are no more rolling stores like Dad's. But our father delivered rain or shine, took off only on Christmas and Thanksgiving, and had a relationship with his customers of honesty, friendship and integrity.**

in 1946 he restarted his routes. He was given more territory in Jasper and Hampton counties and put Hilton Head on hold for a while.

During this period, my father sold Rawleigh products and carried everything in his car. In 1948 he bought a station wagon and carried more stuff.

But then in 1950 our country needed experienced radar/navigators for the new conflict in Korea and duty called. He left with one week's notice in 1950. My mother's brother, just graduating from high school, agreed to operate the business with my mother's help while Dad went to war. The old '48 Ford gave out and my mother and her brother ordered a new blue 1951 Chevy Suburban. What room! No more broken springs, and less time lost to bogging down in the old wagon trails. Work was fun.

My father returned in 1952 and took over his business once again. My uncle moved to Allendale County, where he started his own routes and worked them until he retired in the 1990s, raising five children, just like our parents did.

In February 1953, my parents' third son arrived. He was named Thomas after my father, but not quite, as Dad did not want him called "junior." Until he was a grown man, our mayor was called Thomas and our daddy was called by his given name of Tommie.

### TULIPS AND TOMATOES

On Aug. 20, 1954, our parents decided to visit Hilton Head on the new government-operated ferry boat. While traveling around the island on the north end where roads were, we met several of Dad's old customers who asked

when he was coming back. Within 30 days Dad bought a lot on North Forest Beach, and started his old route on Hilton Head. Now he also sold blankets, bedspreads and dry goods. He no longer took eggs or chickens for payment. He added a variety of candy that people sold for him for a percentage of the sales.

In 1956 the first bridge opened, bringing more people to Hilton Head and a great opportunity for the land to be farmed. Tulips were grown to be sold to florists, and tomato farms started. People were paid a dime in cash for each basket of tomatoes picked, and my job was to roll dimes. My father's business was at its peak.

In 1959 he bought the first of several step-vans to operate out of. It was blue and white and had a 12-foot walk-in area. The Rawleigh Boy now had a rolling store, selling clothes, shoes, pots and pans and the old standby medicines and seasonings from Rawleigh. With this larger truck he had to cut limbs from trees to get up the little drive paths to customers' homes.

In 1979 our father — Tommie Peeples, the "Rawleigh Man," the "Rawleigh Boy" — left us. He had raised five children: Bennie, Bobby, Tom, Paul and Melanie. Today, I still talk to some of the older islanders who remember him and his wares.

### CUSTOMERS FOR LIFE

Recently a man my age said his mother still keeps a bottle of his liniment she's had for years, just to smell it. I was told of a young girl being bitten by a rattlesnake in 1942. With no doctor on the island, "the Rawleigh Boy" was asked what

he could do. He knew External Anti-Pain Oil would reduce swelling so he poured a bottle over the bite and said to repeat often. The girl lived to be a life-long customer.

Another story we always heard happened before Dad's departure in the military. Someone asked him to stop at a house where he'd never done business. He went to the home and a man was lying sick with malaria and flies were all over. He asked my father for some aspirin, fly spray and a sprayer on credit. My father never expected the man to live but promptly gave him the items and wrote it down in his book. In 1955, after he had started back his Hilton Head route, a man waved him down and said, "You don't remember me but you gave me things when you thought I was dying. I want to pay my bill." Dad looked in the back on his route book and pulled up the account. He had a long-lasting relationship with this customer.

With all of the modern means of transportation and stores all around, there are no more rolling stores like Dad's. But our father delivered rain or shine, took off only on Christmas and Thanksgiving, and had a relationship with his customers of honesty, friendship and integrity.

I am glad to know he still is remembered on Hilton Head today.

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## **The Peeples Choice**

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May 4, 2006

Rev. Dr. Robert E. H. Peeples  
Mrs. Cora McKenzie Peeples  
8 Moonshell Road  
Hilton Head Island, SC 29928

Dear Robert & Cora,

I was so surprised and touched when I found on my desk at Town Hall the information on the genealogy of my family.

It was particularly moving to re-read the articles about my father's murder. There is not a day that goes by that I don't think of him and wonder what would be had he not been killed so early in life. I also enjoyed the article on Bennie and his family.

I find the family tree also very interesting. I know you are an avid historian and I appreciate you sharing some of our family history.

You take care of each other. If you get the chance come to the Memorial Day service at Shelter Cove Park at 10:30 on Monday, May 29<sup>th</sup>. Hope to see you both there.

Your cousin,

  
Thomas D. Peeples