

AGGIE GREY  
FAMOUS HOTELIER



When one mentions the name "Aggie Grey" in Europe, the Americas or any other part of the world, the idea of hot suns, blue lagoons, and the mystique of the South Seas comes to mind.

Nowhere in the South Seas is there a hotelier as famous as Aggie Grey, and since World War II, her name has been synonymous with Samoa. Her untiring services and her hospitable and beguiling ways have won her laudatory recognition throughout the Pacific region.

She has been described by Michener in his Tales of the South Pacific as the fortifying concept behind his character "Bloody Mary." Although Aggie has disputed this characterization, there exists the romantic inference of Aggie as the epitomization of Michener's creation.

In 1971, the Western Samoa Government paid tribute to Mrs. Aggie Grey for her dedicated services as a hotelier and her tremendous contributions to the Tourist Industry of Samoa by issuing a special postage stamp in her honor. In 1984, her services as a member of the Commonwealth were recognized by the Queen of England and she was awarded an O.B.E. (Order of the British Empire).

Perhaps Aggie inherited her perseverance and steadfastness from her father, William Swan, and her kind, compassionate personality from her mother, Pele Maiava. William Swan, the son of a chemist, was born in England. His family migrated to New Zealand at the turn of the last century and William was sent back to England to complete his education. On his return, the Swan family once again migrated to the Fiji Islands where William studied medicine, specializing in tropical diseases. In 1880, he was appointed ship's doctor for the American trader, "Mohican," and in 1889 William Swan decided to settle down for good in Western Samoa.

Swan set up a pharmacy in downtown Apia, Western Samoa, situated opposite the International Hotel. It was not long before he became enamoured with a young Samoan girl named Pele, who was then attending the convent school at Savalalo, not far from his pharmacy. The famous Robert Louis Stevenson frequented the Swan pharmacy, being a sickly person, and was also befriended by William.

According to some old residents, Pele was a beautiful woman with a gentle nature. She was from the village of Toamua and was very much aware of her cultural background as a Samoan, but was also respected for her knowledge of European customs.

In 1891, William Swan and Pele Maiava were married. Together they raised four children. Aggie was the second in this family of four. She and her sisters and brother were born into a Samoa that was still in the turmoil of internecine warfare and colonial disputes between America, England and Germany, who were vying for supremacy of power in Samoa. They grew up in the times of the German occupation of Western Samoa, and the three girls were known as "The Swan Bouquet" -- the envy of many a young lady and the toast of Apia.

Aggie was 17 at the time of the New Zealand occupation, following the German occupation, and she had numerous suitors. She fell in love with a New Zealander, Gordon Hay Mackenzie. They were married in 1917 and had four children, all of whom have now passed away. Mr. Mackenzie died in New Zealand of an illness, and in 1926, Aggie remarried. Charles Grey, also a New Zealander, and Aggie had three more children: Maureen, Edward and Allan -- the latter now the manager of the famous Aggie Grey Hotel.

The International Hotel which was once opposite the Swan Pharmacy in downtown Apia was dismantled one day and moved to a new site by the Vaisigano River. Not long afterwards, the Swan Pharmacy was also shifted to the Vaisigano next to the International. It was not until after World War II that the International Hotel became known throughout the Pacific as the Aggie Grey Hotel.

When war broke out in the Pacific in 1942, Aggie was in the middle of a family crisis. Her husband went bankrupt, and her daughter Pele was seriously ill with typhoid in Pago Pago. She had to borrow money to make ends meet. Meanwhile troops arriving from America into Western Samoa were on the increase and the American dollar was flowing freely. Mary, Aggie's younger sister who was managing the Casino Hotel, was doing extremely well, and on her advice, Aggie began selling hamburgers and coffee until the demand became phenomenal. This then was the start of Aggie's hotel. The old International became her first club, which soon developed into a flourishing hotel, catering to GI's who were a long way from home.

It was during this time that Aggie Grey met James Michener, who was doing service with the U. S. troops in Pago Pago, American Samoa, and would come over for the occasional weekend in Apia. He referred to her as a "marvellous woman, inventive, and a creation of war; ebullient, effervescent, outrageous, illegal, and terribly bright." It was obvious that Michener had a great love, respect and admiration for Aggie, and his description of her was embodied in his ideal of "Bloody Mary," later portrayed in the film South Pacific.

Aggie Grey never looked back after the war years. Her husband passed away in 1943, and in 1945, when the troops started to withdraw, she began

to consolidate her hotel, extending it until her ambitions as a hotelier were finally realized.

Over the years the tourist industry in Samoa started to increase at a faster pace. The guests who came to "Aggie's" ranged from celebrities, diplomats and royalty, to the most ordinary from diverse parts of the globe. To everyone of these people, Aggie accorded the same hospitality as she did to the lonely GI's of the war years. Her genuine hospitality is natural and reflects her accommodating Samoan background, and she makes sure that the feeling of "home away from home" is a prevalent permanent fixture in her establishment.

With such a colorful background, Aggie never forgets that she is first and foremost a daughter of Samoa. She has always maintained a deep love for her Samoan aiga (family). She is consciously proud to be a Samoan and is always ready with fine mats and money to assist in any aiga gatherings and traditional exchanges. This is why her aiga never neglects her and holds her in high regard and deep respect. Her help to her aiga also extends to giving a lot of her relatives jobs in the hotel, most of them being from her beloved mother's village, Toamua.

She is a willing donor to useful activities and organizations that are in need of financial support. She is known by everyone on Apia as "Aunt Aggie," a sign of respect and affection, because of her loving and compassionate qualities known in Samoan as amio tausaa (conduct that is proper and popularly respected). She is by no means a showy, flamboyant person. She is quiet spoken and gentle yet always ready with a joke and a winning smile. Her children and grandchildren have inherited these charming qualities.

One of the highlights of a barbecue fiafia (feast and fun) night at Aggie Grey's has been Aggie doing the graceful Samoan siva (dance). It is the culmination of all she has achieved during her lifetime. From her small beginnings, Aggie has reached the peak of her success, and as the years wane for her, she sits back contented while her children take over the management of Aggie Grey's.

In her long years, a legend grew. Aggie Grey is that legend.